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Red-footed Booby *(Sula sula)*. Middle Island, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

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Aims and Activities: The primary aim of the Society is to promote a forum for the exchange of information on seabirds, and of landbirds at sea, by members for whom birdwatching is a spare-time recreation and hobby. The secondary aim is to co-ordinate the efforts of individual members using standardised recording methods so that observations can be of value to the professional ornithologist ashore. In addition to the promotion of observations afloat, the RNBWS organises fieldwork and expeditions, usually in cooperation with the Army and RAF Ornithological Societies.
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Material for publication in *Sea Swallow* should be sent to the Editor. Instructions to authors can be found on page 72.
An application form for membership is at page 68 of this edition of *Sea Swallow*.

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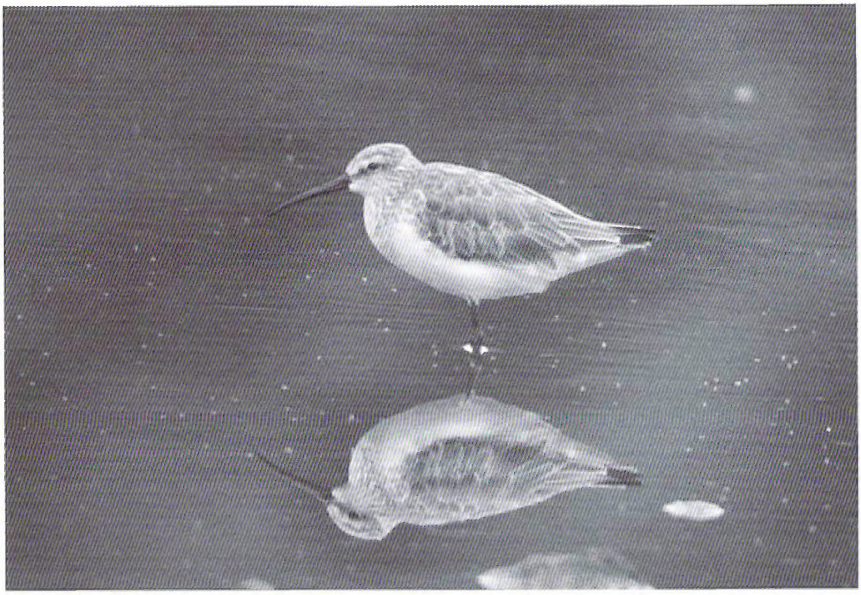

Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*),Horsburgh Point Inlet, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

PRESIDENT'S FOREWORD

Once again the contents of our journal encapsulate the spirit of RNBWS, and demonstrate the rewards of our interest in birds in the many places where Service life and opportunities take us. Many of you will have spotted Petty Officer Writer Leigh Gordon's spectacularly illustrated article on the Society's expedition to the Chagos Archipelago in the October issue of NAVY NEWS, and her lively account will I hope bring in many volunteers for future expeditions. Now we come to the comprehensive scientific report of that expedition, which is a highlight of this volume of Sea Swallow. Like many reports in Sea Swallow over the decades this will be an important standard reference, and congratulations are due to all the team members for the quality of their field-work, especially to Major Peter Carr for the care he has taken in the crafting of this permanent record of their achievement.

Much closer to home, I joined Peter and a small band of field-work stalwarts during an excellent weekend at the Dungeness bird observatory, held in the spring as part of the training for the Chagos expedition. This was just one serial in an excellent programme for 2005, including Joint Service events both in UK and further afield. I know that the pace of life for RN/RM personnel, and indeed for all seafarers, is unrelenting today, but I do encourage you to look for a space to get out and join in, and to taste the excitement and satisfaction of field observation for yourselves. New skills such as bird-ringing are available, and, as this journal shows, you can leave a permanent record of your contribution to the monitoring of our rich maritime environment.

DAVID DOBSON President

CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

As this volume goes to press, we are discussing a radical approach to our AGM in Fleet Headquarters on Friday 2 December. We have already planned to include a presentation by our expedition team from Diego Garcia. Since this group included several very talented photographers, this serial promises to be a visual feast! Subsequently we have learnt that our Merchant Navy Vice Chairman, Captain Neil Cheshire, will be in UK and able to attend for the first time in his long membership. This is too good an opportunity to miss, and he also will make a presentation, on his seabird observations in the Pacific. You will be pleased to know that your Committee are taking steps to facilitate the handling of the business part of our meeting with the utmost despatch, so that we can enjoy this treat to the full. I hope that we will see as many as possible of you on the day.

It is very appropriate that this double bill will represent two pillars of RNBWS: expedition work in remote oceanic islands, and ship-borne observation. In the latter, context I note another highlight of this volume. Lieutenant Commander W A J Cunningham's wartime records from *HMS Snowdrop* take us back to our roots, with men who in the midst of the toughest war ever fought, saw the significance of an alert eye for the natural world around them. I trust that we can honour this heritage, and I am glad to hear from the Editor that seabird records are building up for analysis in the next edition.

MICHAEL BARRITT Chairman

EDITORIAL

This edition of *Sea Swallow* contains two key articles - a seminal work on the recording of land birds over the Caspian Sea in the late 1990s by Stewart Hingston whilst based on the safety standby vessel MV *Tabriz Khalilbeyli* and the report of the major RNBWS expedition to Diego Garcia in May/June 2005. The latter marks a quantum step change in the ability of the Society to contribute to the wider knowledge base, and sets the seal on a number of close associations with major national and international conservation organisations. Initial planning is already in place to repeat the data collection in late 2006. Completing the set of excellent articles is Lt Cdr Cunningham's recollections whilst serving on a *Flower* class corvette during WWII. Such articles are the lifeblood of *Sea Swallow*, but do not hide the fact that for the first time in many years, there have not been enough records forwarded from sea to enable a coherent analysis to take place. All records, taken from wherever, are important as they continue to add to the extensive database built by the Society. Please make every effort to forward all records whenever you are lucky enough to be away from the UK.

Gary Lewis, Editor

RNBWS Representative, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

DIEGO SURVEY II (2005) - EXPEDITION REPORT

By Major Pete Carr RM

Background to the Expedition

It had long been the intention of the Society to revisit Diego Garcia to develop the pilot survey work undertaken there by the 1997 expedition. At the 2003 AGM in London it was agreed that a second expedition should be mounted at some point in the future and initial scoping exercises were undertaken to gauge the best dates and most important, the specific aims of the expedition. In March 2004, the Expedition Member for RNBWS had a most fortuitous meeting with the International Officer of the RSPB on Ascension Island. At that time the RSPB were seeking assistance with drafting a report to BirdLife International recommending which areas of the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT) should receive Important Bird Area status. The Expedition Member drafted the report for the RSPB (Carr, 2004), the report was forwarded to BirdLife International and the recommendations from that report now form the basis of the BIOT chapter in the seminal work *Important Bird Areas in Asia: key sites for conservation* (BirdLife International, 2004).

Introduction

Table One shows the ten areas within BIOT that received Important Bird Area (IBA) status, one being the Barton Point Nature Reserve area of Diego Garcia which includes the three islets in the mouth of the lagoon, East, Middle and West Isles.

Table One: Important Bird Areas in the British Indian Ocean Territories.

IBA Code	Area of Chagos	Site Name
IO 001	Diego Garcia	Barton Point Nature Reserve
IO 002	Chagos Bank	Danger Island
IO 003	Chagos Bank	Sea Cow
IO 004	Chagos Bank	North Brother
IO 005	Chagos Bank	Middle Brother
IO 006	Chagos Bank	South Brother
IO 007	Chagos Bank	Nelson
IO 008	Peros Banhos	Petite Ile Bois Mangue
IO 009	Peros Banhos	Ile Parasol
IO 010	Peros Banhos	Ile Longue

Barton Point received IBA status on the strength of the counts of breeding Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* produced by the 1997 RNBWS expedition (Carr 1998) coupled with those published by Symens in *Ecology of the Chagos* (1999). Barton Point has further been accepted as a Ramsar site (Pienkowski 2005) on the strength of this data.

A recurring theme when analysing the ornithological papers published about the Chagos is the paucity of counts of the internationally important breeding seabird colonies undertaken using recognised and repeatable ecological census techniques, and this dearth of accurate data exists in all of the newly established IBAs. It is imperative in conservation strategies that long term monitoring projects supplying accurate, reliable and repeatable counts are undertaken in order to assess the health of the populations present.

After consultation with the environmental adviser to the Commissioner for BIOT and the International Officer of the RSPB who is responsible for British Overseas Territories, it was agreed that Barton Point IBA required an accurate 'start point' of data on which to base future monitoring projects. This start point data was to be collected using a repeatable, scientifically credible census technique.

It was also apparent that information on all bird species occurring in the Chagos was lacking. For example, it was still not known when some resident species breed or whether a bird seemingly migrating to the area was a regular visitor or a vagrant and even in what numbers regular migrants occur.

Expedition Aims

In view of the important requirement for accurate data on the breeding seabird populations, particularly for the ten recently created IBAs, the expedition principal aim was "to undertake a scientifically credible, repeatable survey of the breeding seabirds of Barton Point Important Bird Area".

The secondary aim was to conduct an ornithological survey of the whole of Diego Garcia to assist in the much-needed task of gathering data on all the birds of the Chagos Archipelago.

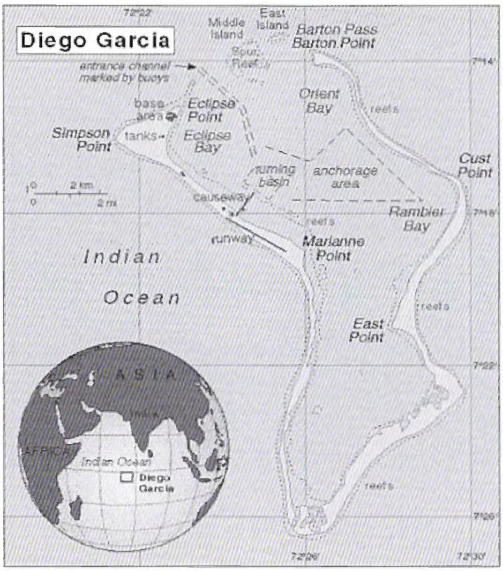

Figure 1: The Chagos archipelago

Expedition Activity

Eight members of RNBWS, Lt Col Steve Newing RM (SN), Cdr Frank Ward Rtd (FW), Lt Cdr Gary Lewis (GL), Capt Peter Carr RM (PC), CPO Steve Copsey (SC), CPO Hugh Maughan (HM), PO Chris Patrick (CP) and PO Leigh Gordon (LG) deployed to Diego Garcia via Singapore on Sunday 22 May 05 and returned to UK on Saturday 04 Jun 05. A day of recognition and ornithological census technique training was conducted at Sungei Buloh Wetlands Reserve in Singapore *en route*. The actual survey period ran from 26 May to 01 June because of a cancelled flight from Singapore to Diego Garcia.

Once on the atoll, after a short period of administration when accommodation and vehicles were taken over and familiarisation briefs took place, the survey work began in earnest. PC and FW deployed by Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB) to map the extent of the Red-footed Booby colony around the lagoon and ocean-side of the Barton Point IBA. This was essential in order to map the random transect start points for the scientific survey and to gauge the extent of the colony for future reference and repeat surveys. The remainder of the expedition team were given a tour of the areas of Diego Garcia that would feature heavily in the general ornithological survey; PO Chris Patrick, a veteran of the 1997 expedition, led this.

RNBWS Expedition Team. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

The Barton Point Important Bird Area Survey

Four members (SN, PC, HM & LG) concentrated on the Barton Point IBA survey. Each day the team deployed by vehicle, with ocean kayaks and mountain bikes on board, to the survey

area. Once the limit of driveable track had been reached, the team would then continue on foot, bike or kayak, depending on which section of the IBA was to be surveyed. It should be noted that textbook transect recording cannot be employed for counting the breeding boobies of Barton Point. All of the birds nest within 20m of the waters' edge, often in dense impenetrable habitat. However, because of the obviousness and tameness of breeding boobies in trees, all nests and chicks can be found and counted by standing in front of the colony and looking in – this often entailed counting transects waist deep in water or from the seat of a kayak.

The survey methodology employed was to navigate by kayak, bike or foot, directed by a Global Positioning System (GPS), to one of the 272 pre-determined transect points around the colony. When the exact latitude, longitude and minutes were arrived at a point was marked indicating the front-centre of the transect plot. From this point two boundaries were marked out, 15m either side of the central point, and all of the birds present to a depth of 20m, (giving a transect area of 30m x 20m), were then recorded by categories. The principal categories used were adult on nest (no other information), adult on eggs, downy chick, partially feathered chick, fully feathered chick, fledged chick still dependant, juvenile, immature and adult non-breeding. Recording a randomly selected 115 transects from across the entire area of the colony over a five-day period allowed, by a process of mathematical extrapolation the total number of birds to be calculated. (For a full explanation of methodology and analysis of results see Carr in prep).

All of the days on the IBA survey were adventurous because of their arduous nature, be they from the long distances that had to be covered daily in searing temperatures, the rutted muddy terrain to be biked over, standing waist deep in water with a clipboard and binoculars counting birds when you know there are sharks in the area or, (probably worst of all), sudden squall conditions when in the kayaks.

The Diego Garcia Survey

Concurrently, the remaining four expedition members were covering the areas of ornithological importance throughout the rest of Diego Garcia. This involved long days in the field in extremely high temperatures, wading through muddy lagoons and pushing through *scaveola* scrub to visit all areas of the atoll. Much of the recording was of distant birds on the far shores of lagoons and telescopes were an essential tool.

The movement and possible arrival of waders on and around the atoll were of particular interest, and it is hoped that the data gathered will contribute to a project analysing the use of the Central Asian Flyway by waders (Peinkowski, in prep); the Chagos is likely to be the final destination for migrant/vagrant waders heading south from Asia.

Each evening there was a debriefing session when each team gave an account of the day's activities and the Expedition Recorder logged the teams' observations. The next day's tasks were then planned in detail, including the important logistical arrangements for the IBA survey team.

Results

The results of the ornithological survey of Diego Garcia are presented as a systematic list of sightings at Annex A; this includes the breeding seabird counts from the Barton Point IBA survey.

A précis of the seabird counts from the Barton Point IBA is that the Red-footed Booby colony had a total of 4370 breeding pairs, found on Barton Point (3340 pairs), West Island (157 pairs), Middle Island (255 pairs) and East Island (618 pairs). The extent of the breeding colony of Red-footed Booby on Diego Garcia, the parameters being determined by Global Positioning System (GPS) was from 7° 21.161'S, 72° 27.856'E ocean-side (Cust Point area) to 7° 17.800'S, 72° 29.665'E lagoon-side (East Point area).

Wader Census. Turtle Cove, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Further seabirds breeding were Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, with a minimum 128 pairs at the egg stage of breeding on West Island, Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*, with an estimated 30-50 pairs on Middle Island, and White Tern *Gygis alba*. The latter is an extremely difficult species to assess because these birds do not nest in colonies, they do not all nest at the same time of the year, and the nests themselves, in large trees, are difficult to locate and observe. That said, it is thought that at any one time some 20-40 pairs of White Terns are breeding on Diego Garcia. This species is the only seabird that commonly nests on Diego Garcia outside

the Barton Point IBA. (Yellow-billed Tropicbird *Phaëthon lepturus* is the only other seabird thought to nest outside of the Barton Point IBA on Diego Garcia).

Sightings of interest from the rest of Diego Garcia include four species which are new to the Chagos: Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*, White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa*, Saunders' Little Tern *Sterna saundersi* and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*. Also seen were several species that have been recorded only once before: Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus;* White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* (2 birds); Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (at least 2 present during the survey); Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* (2 seen 30 May); Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* (2 seen 27 May); finally Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* (2 seen 28 May and a further 3 on 2 June).

Other sightings of species that have been seldom noted in the past such as Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficolla* and Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* enhance the scant records supplied by previous ornithologists and are assisting in building up the knowledge of migration patterns and populations present in the area. The six pairs of breeding Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* that were found at all stages of the breeding cycle in amongst the very compact Red-footed Booby colony on West Island were of note.

Discussion

This discussion sets out to place the 2005 observations in an ornithological context by combining them with the limited historical data for the area and then, where possible and applicable, hypothesises on what the combined knowledge means in terms of a population status and occurrence in the area. (Annex B provides a consolidated list of the findings). The discussion then deals in detail with the three components of the Chagos avifauna (seabirds, resident land birds, migrants/vagrants), beginning with a general overview of the group and then goes on to deal with an explanation of the status awarded to a species, and any issues arising from the observations. The discussion concludes with a brief summary on the changes in habitat on Diego Garcia between the 1997 and 2005 surveys.

Seabirds

The long-term decline of oceanic nesting seabirds has been well documented (e.g. Burger & Gochfield, 1994). However, in spite of this international trend, the scant evidence available suggests that since man departed the atolls of the Chagos (see Bourne 1971 for details of depopulation) seabird populations have re-colonised and are increasing in numbers; this is certainly the case in the Barton Point Important Bird Area on the only remaining permanently populated atoll of the area, Diego Garcia (see Bourne 1971 for historical context, Carr 1998, Symens 1999). Because of the overall decline in numbers of breeding seabirds, the seabird populations of the Chagos are from an ornithological point of view the most important bird group present and should be the primary focus of future research and conservation priorities.

Procellariidae* & *Hydrobatidae: The sightings of Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*, Audubon's Shearwater *Procellaria lherminieri* and Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, whilst exhilarating for those observers used to sea watches from the likes of Portland Bill

merely prove in the case of the two shearwaters that these local breeders forage around the seas of the archipelago and in the case of the storm-petrel that its oceanic wanderings bring it to the Chagos; all to be expected.

Phaethontidae: The breeding status and cycle of Yellow-billed Tropicbird *Phaëthon lepturus* on Diego Garcia, and indeed throughout the archipelago, remain enigmatic. Gadow (1887) was told of a pair that had bred on Diego Garcia for several years and the 1997 RNBWS expedition believed the species (in August) was at least prospecting for a nesting site in large trees at Point Marianne on Diego Garcia (Carr, 1998). Symens (1999) found two pairs nesting in trees in February/March on Takamaka (Salomon group) and estimated from aerial courtship behaviour that there were a further three pairs breeding on Diego Garcia, five pairs on the Peros Banhos chain and a further three pairs in the Salomon group. It therefore appears likely that this species breeds on Diego Garcia infrequently and in very small numbers in the Barton Point IBA and probably also elsewhere on the atoll. Throughout the Chagos it is likely that it breeds in arboreal circumstances in very low numbers with the timing of breeding remaining uncertain.

Sulidae: There is no evidence to suggest that Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* breeds on Diego Garcia though it unquestionably occurs there regularly, particularly on the three islets in the mouth of the lagoon (Carr 1998, Symens 1999). In contrast, the 4370 breeding pairs of Red-footed Booby found by the expedition in May 2005 show that this species is present in internationally important numbers and confirms the status of Important Bird Area conferred on the Barton Point site. (The qualifying criteria for IBA status for Barton Point was that it held over 3000 breeding pairs of *S. sula*).

Juvenile Red-footed Booby *(Sula sula)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Neither Carr (1998) nor Symens (1999) recorded the outer limits of the breeding colony of Red-footed Booby when conducting their assessment of breeding numbers of the Barton Point area. Personal observations of the breeding area utilised in 2005 compared to the 1997 survey suggest that the breeding and loafing area has moved south by at least two kilometres and has now passed the recognised limit of the Barton Point Nature Reserve and moved in to unprotected (though unthreatened) areas.

This non-quantitative observation of colony area expansion seems consistent with the roughly 278% rise in breeding numbers from 1200 breeding pairs that Symens found at Barton Point in 1995 to the 3340 breeding pairs found a decade later. (It is considered that the counts of breeding Red-footed Booby at Barton Point produced by the 1997 RNBWS expedition employed too crude a methodology to produce accurate counts and have not been included in this analysis). This apparent extension of the breeding area and the definite increase in breeding numbers witnessed over the past decade throws up more questions than it answers. As the laying dates throughout the colony are so varied, with the full spectrum of breeding activity being witnessed in May 2005, is this a seasonal-type extension that relates to a breeding spike? Are there any triggers that induce breeding activity, for example climatic or oceanic conditions? Is this extension related to the eradication of cats that has occurred over the past two years? Another obvious question is why in 2005 these birds still confine themselves to breeding on the eastern leg of the horseshoe of Diego Garcia when apparently suitable habitat exists elsewhere on the atoll?

It is likely that the assumed extension of the breeding and loafing area is due to a combination of factors, the primary ones being the restriction of personnel serving on the atoll to the Barton Point area (which limits disturbance to the colony) and a genuine rise in breeding numbers on mainland Diego Garcia. Perhaps their extension into further new areas is only a matter of time?

Historically, although factual evidence is scant, it would appear that along with other species of seabirds, the Red-footed Booby was lost as a breeding species to mainland Diego Garcia around the turn of the twentieth century, and re-population began only after the humans moved from the eastern-side Plantation area to its present western-side site in the 1970's, leaving the Barton Point area undisturbed. The return of breeding seabirds to Barton Point, albeit in much smaller numbers than the 19th century, must therefore be considered a modest success story in conservation terms. Further analysis and discussion of the Red-footed Booby population of Barton Point IBA will be published in the near future (Carr in prep).

Fregatidae: Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* and Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* occur throughout the Chagos and have been recorded to be breeding in December, January and February, the former on North Brother and the latter on Nelson from the Chagos Bank (Gadow 1907, Baldwin 1975). Both species probably bred in extensive seabird colonies on other atolls before the arrival of man. Great Frigatebirds of all ages have been reported in good numbers on the islets in the mouth of Diego Garcia lagoon (Carr 1996, 1998, 2003) and this continued to be the case in 2005. It is therefore mildly surprising that not a single Great Frigatebird has been found breeding amongst the Red-footed Booby colonies on the three islets in this century. Further observations are required from the whole archipelago to understand the

breeding cycle of these species in the Chagos and it would be exciting and inspirational in rejuvenation terms if frigatebirds were to colonise Diego Garcia in the future.

Laridae & Sternidae: The May 2005 record of an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* flapping lazily over the accommodation, when added to records from the Maldives (Strickland and Jenner 1978, Ash & Shafeeg 1994) and the 1972 record from Egmont (Hirons 1973), suggests that this species occurs in the Chagos as vagrant. Not so the daily occurrence in May 2005 of White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*. A picture appears to be building up suggesting that marsh terns are more regular in the central Indian Ocean than previously thought. Baldwin (1975) claims a Black Tern *Childonias niger* on Ile Sudest, Egmont on 1 February 1975; Carr (1996) recorded seeing up to eight marsh terns daily between 26-29 March 1996 on Diego Garcia; Bruner (1995) found a single Whiskered Tern *Caledonians hybridus* on Diego Garcia on 21 March 1995; and Cdr N J P Wraith RN, a former British Representative, recorded White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* regularly in March 1995. It appears that marsh terns, certainly White-winged Black Tern, occur every year in the Chagos in small numbers during the Northern Hemisphere winter.

The identification of non-breeding *Chlidonias* terns can be difficult: in the vagrant- rich area of the Chagos this problem is compounded by the now confirmed presence of the very marsh tern-like White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa*. The nine birds seen daily dip feeding over the sewage ponds, were initially identified as Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus* and it was only through an excellent series of photographs by CP that the error was unearthed. These nine birds are the first recorded from the Chagos; it may be that marsh tern records from the past refer to this species.

The very distinctive Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*, of which a single non-breeding plumage individual was photographed as it frequented the lagoons at the southern end of Diego Garcia throughout the expedition, was a first for the Chagos though it should not be regarded as an unexpected find. The Asian population of this migratory species is known to winter in southern India and Sri Lanka (Cramp (Ed) 1985) and in the Maldives it has been recorded in small numbers (Phillips, 1963) and possibly breeds (Ash & Shafeeg, 1994). Moreover, Strickland and Jenner (1978) noted it as a winter visitor in small numbers to Addu Atoll, the most southerly group of the Maldive archipelago.

Of the sea terns, Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* (Carr 1996, 1998), Roseate Tern *Sterna dougalii* (Hutson 1975, Bruner 1995, Carr 1998), Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* (in Bourne 1966, Hutson 1975) and Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* (Hirons 1973, Baldwin 1975, Carr 1998) have been recorded previously in the area and are thought to be non breeding but probably annual visitors to the Chagos.

The status of Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*/Saunders' Little Tern *Sterna saundersi* in the Chagos is slowly being understood. Records to date suggest that the nominate subspecies of Little Tern (*albifrons*) occurs regularly and breeds in small numbers at least on Diego Garcia (see Bruner 1995 & Symens 1999 for breeding data) and that the south-east and eastern Asian subspecies *sinensis*, as proved by the May 2005 RNBWS sighting, occurs as a vagrant. As predicted by Dr W.R.P. Bourne (Howells 1983), Saunders' Little Tern does occur in the area.

though as the May 2005 RNBWS record is the only confirmed and photographed individual, the status of this species in the area appears to be as a vagrant.

The remaining species of sea terns recorded by the expedition, Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*, Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*, and Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* have all been recorded as breeding in the Chagos (Symens 1999) and the 2005 expedition records confirm their continued presence and by finding them 'not breeding', add to the knowledge of these species' annual cycle in this area.

Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, Middle Island, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* Steve Copsey.

The two noddies that occur in the Chagos, Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus and* Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris* remain something of a mystery as to what breeding strategy they adopt. In recent years Brown Noddies have been recorded in all stages of breeding in February and March (Symens 1999); on eggs and with large chicks in May (Hutson 1975); nest building in July (Bruner 1995); with eggs and very small chicks in August (Carr 1998); and on this expedition on eggs, again in May. The limited data for Lesser Noddy suggests that a more synchronised approach is adopted and possibly the main breeding period is between January to March (Baldwin 1975, Symens 1999), though nesting birds, most likely at the egg laying phase, were found on this expedition in May. The exact breeding season in the Chagos for both species remains uncertain.

For Brown Noddy, historic data from the Chagos Bank (Baldwin 1975) and West Island (Carr 1998) together with the observations of May 2005, indicate that synchronised breeding takes place where terrestrial nesting occurs and, on rat-free *Rattus rattus* atolls, even when arboreal nesting occurs e.g. the Chagos Bank atolls (Baldwin 1975). Non-synchronised nesting has not been recorded for ground breeding Brown Noddy in the Chagos, but is evident in arboreal nesters on rat-infested (and possibly Feral Cat-infested) atolls. Breeding densities of Brown Noddy also appear to have some correlation with rat infestation. In the Chagos the most

numerous breeding colonies are found on the rat-free Chagos Bank atolls or on the largest atolls in the remainder of the archipelago that are rat infested but have trees, particularly *Cocos* stands. A hypothesis is that on rat-free atolls there is synchronised breeding of large colonies, both terrestrial and arboreal, and small rat infested atolls have less synchronised, tree nesting populations in very low numbers. Numbers breeding on large rat infested atolls in trees possibly fall somewhere between the two preceding strategies.

White Tern *Gygis alba* appears to be a common breeding species throughout the entire Chagos and nests singly in trees at no specific period.

Resident Landbirds

The resident landbird population of Diego Garcia is strongly indicative of the entire Chagos and is comprised of a mixture of introduced species coupled with very few natural colonists. With the exception of Cattle Egret all species appear to be either thriving or stable.

Ardeidae: The small population (9 or 12 birds; records are unclear) of Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* (likely to be ssp *seychellarum*), first introduced to Diego Garcia in 1953 or 1955 (Lever 1987) had reached a breeding population of 27 pairs by 1960 (Loustau-Lalanne 1962). The population appears to have remained stable up to about 1982 when Howells (1982) noted them to be common and found six pairs breeding at East Point. By 1995 there had been a dramatic population increase and Bruner (1995) found a flock of 248 birds at the sanitary landfill site. In 1996 Carr (1996) found a single flock of 146 birds in March and other smaller gatherings of 86 and 44 and estimated the population on Diego Garcia to be in the region of 450 birds. This estimate was thought to be fairly accurate because the 1997 RNBWS expedition found a single flock of 263 birds on the airfield in August and a co-ordinated count of a nocturnal communal roost at Point Marianne produced 386 birds (Carr 2000). By 2003 the nocturnal roost and breeding site at Point Marianne had disappeared and the population on Diego Garcia had reduced to less than 50 birds (Carr 2003), while the May 2005 population estimate is of 30-50 birds. It is possible that the population decline is due to disturbance caused by the erection of a tented city at the breeding site of Point Marianne added to an active campaign to dissuade the birds from congregating on the damp areas of the airfield in an effort to reduce bird strikes.

It is of note that Cattle Egret are now breeding in *scaveola* bushes on the undisturbed West Island in the dense colony of Red-footed Booby. Cattle Egret are known to breed among colonial waterbirds, (Hancock & Kushlan 1984) though whether they have been found breeding with Red-footed Booby before is uncertain. There is evidence of breeding on Diego Garcia in December (Loustau-Lalanne 1962), June (Pocklington 1967), May (Hutson 1975), October (Howells 1982) and August (Carr 2000), though no observer has ever claimed to see a bird in full breeding garb. The range of eggs to fully fledged young found in the six nests on West Island in May 2005 indicates either a protracted breeding season or, as historical records suggest, a year round continuous breeding strategy. This long lasting breeding season is likely to be related to food availability.

Cattle Egret have been known to predate breeding birds and their introduction to Diego Garcia could have been a cause for concern had they spread to the other atolls of the Chagos

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

that hold terrestrial breeding populations of delicate species. At present, with the massive decline in the nucleus population and the lack of sightings from any other atoll, possibly due to a lack of suitable feeding habitat on any of them, this appears not to be a major concern. Little Green Heron *Butorides striatus*, a species widely recorded throughout the Chagos has the potential to predate tern nests but appears to have had no effect on breeding seabirds at all. This is true even on very small islets such as West Island that in May 2005 had ground nesting Brown Noddy in abundance and also held at least four Little Green Heron.

Phasianidae: The total feral population of Domestic Fowl *Gallus gallus* resident on Diego Garcia is difficult to estimate. Comparing the May 2005 numbers to those present during the 1997 RNBWS survey, there is broad agreement with Carr's comments of 2003 that the atoll population, particularly around the accommodation, appears to have increased and this is likely to be due to the eradication of feral cats (Carr 2003). A rough estimate of the total atoll population would be in the region of 100–250 birds. It is not known yet whether Domestic Fowl survived after being left on other atolls of the Chagos when man departed, in some cases several decades ago.

Rallidae: White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* appears to be holding its own with a total population on Diego Garcia assessed by the 2005 RNBWS team to be in the region of 50 pairs, agreeing with the 1997 expedition count. The observation in May 2005 of a single parent-dependant juvenile supports the hypothesis that this species breeds throughout the year on Diego Garcia, for there have been other sightings of chicks in March (Carr 1996).

July (Bruner 1995) and August (Carr 2000). This natural colonist may now occur on other atolls of the Chagos that contain freshwater margins.

The remaining four resident landbirds, Indian Barred Ground-dove *Geopelia striata*, Madagascar Turtle Dove *Streptopelia picturata*, Indian Mynah *Acridotheres tristis* and Madagascar Fody *Foudia madagascariensis*, all retain healthy populations on Diego Garcia and no apparent decline has occurred since the 1997 survey (Carr 2000). However, their status throughout the remainder of the archipelago is uncertain. The potential expansion of Indian Mynah throughout the archipelago could be a conservation concern for this species is known to extensively predate the eggs of breeding Sooty Tern on Ascension Island (Hughes, pers comm.).

Migrants and Vagrants

This is the most difficult group in which to place the expedition records in context because of the paucity of historical data. A few regular migrants occur in the Chagos though it can be stated with confidence that Diego Garcia is not a migration hotspot and this is likely to be true for all the other Chagos atolls. The low numbers of regular migrants are likely to be due to the lack of food sources for groups such as waders, ducks and most passerine families, coupled with the Chagos' incredibly remote position in the central Indian Ocean. However, as Bourne (1971) pointed out, the Chagos lay in the path of landbird vagrants from the east, north and west and therein lays the dichotomy; the lack of data for the area means it is difficult to assess whether a species is a regular migrant or a vagrant. The following discussion combines the May 2005 records with historical data and then assesses the status of birds occurring in the Chagos (see Annex B).

Ardeidae: The sighting and photographing of at least two Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* in May 2005 coupled with the six birds found on Diego Garcia in March 1996 (Carr 1997) confirms that this species occurs as at least an occasional visitor to the Chagos. These records are consistent for a species that has been found wandering on isolated island groups in the Atlantic Ocean. It is also known that the (at least) partially migratory race *schistacea* occurs regularly in the Laccadive Islands (Hancock & Kushlan 1984) and there are records of presumed winter visitors from the Maldives, including Addu Atoll (Strickland & Jenner 1978).

Charadriiformes: Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* were likely to have been first found in the Chagos by Hirons (1973) on Egmont, and recorded as Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*. However, it was positively identified from Diego Garcia in 1995 (Bruner 1995), and the only other records came from the RNBWS survey in 1997 (Carr 2000). This species appears to be a regular winter visitor to the Chagos in small numbers with some individuals over-summering. It is presumed that Diego Garcia offers a better habitat for this species (grassy areas and fresh water) compared with other atolls in the Chagos Archipelago, and this bird is therefore unlikely to be numerous anywhere in the region.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Greater Sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii*, Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Sanderling *Calidris alba*, Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* and Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* all appear to be regular Northern Hemisphere winter visitors to the Chagos, with Curlew Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone being by far the

most numerous and widespread. Some individuals stay throughout the summer though none has been found to moult in to full breeding plumage.

Grey Plover *(Pluvialis squatarola)* and Black-naped Tern *(Sterna sumatrana)*. Turtle Cove, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Calidridinae: Three individual Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis* were recorded in May 2005 and this species has been found on Diego Garcia before by Bruner (1995), who located two birds in non-breeding plumage on 20 March 1995 in amongst 20 Little Stint *Calidris minuta*. The 1997 RNBWS expedition found one non-breeding plumage individual in amongst 60 Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* on 16 August 1996 (Carr 2000). Other global records exist that demonstrate the vagrancy of this species and why Diego Garcia in not unexpected as a destination for an overshooting migrant. These records are from the Seychelles, Natal (South Africa) and New Zealand (in Cramp (Ed) 1983). No sightings exist for the Maldives in Phillips (1963), Strickland and Jenner (1978) or Ash & Shafeeg (1994). Because of the difficulty in identifying small *calidrids* in non-breeding plumage, it is fortunate that the excellent photographs by CP clearly demonstrate the critical identification features of this species and confirm its possibly annual occurrence in the Chagos.

Tringinae: Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* occurs regularly during the northern winter with small numbers remaining throughout the austral summer. *N. phaeopus* can be particularly numerous on Diego Garcia with the wintering total likely to be in excess of three figures and these birds generally favour the cropped grass habitat of the airfield and golf course. Their habitat preference may preclude them from being numerous on any of the other Chagos atolls.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*. Sanderling *Calidris alba* and Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus* are less numerous than the previous species, though the May 2005 records coupled with previous observations indicate that they are regular in small numbers and can be found throughout the Chagos (Hirons 1973, Baldwin 1975, Hutson 1975, Bruner 1995, Carr 1996, 2000, 2003).

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* have only been recorded by this expedition (May 2005) and by Bruner (1995) who found two birds on Diego Garcia on 19 and 21 March 1995. It is of note that this species was not found on the Maldives by Phillips (1963), Strickland and Jenner (1978) or Ash & Shafeeg (1994). Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, of which this expedition found two on 30 May 2005, has only been seen once before, by Curtis (1975) who recorded an individual on Ile Boddam in the Salomon group on 8 October 1974. Unlike Spotted Redshank, Marsh Sandpiper regularly winters in southern India and Sri Lanka (Cramp (Ed) 1983) and has been recorded in parties of up to seven as far south as Addu Atoll by Strickland and Jenner (1978). It is therefore a likely candidate for vagrancy to the Chagos. Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* is likely to be in the same category. This expedition found two birds on 28 May 2005 and a further three individuals on 2 June, but has only been recorded once before in the Chagos, by Hutson (1975) who sighted two birds on Diego Garcia on 23 and 24 April 1971. Again, Terek Sandpiper winters in southern Indian and parts of Sri Lanka (Cramp (Ed) 1983) and has been recorded from Addu Atoll (Strickland and Jenner 1978).

Motacillidae: The northern populations of Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* are highly migratory and regularly winter in the Indian sub-continent; it has also been recorded as a vagrant on several Atlantic Ocean islands (Alström and Mild, 2003) and therefore has a proven capability to cover vast expanses of ocean. Closer to the Chagos, it has been recorded from September to November in small numbers on Addu Atoll (Strickland and Jenner 1978). Although no historical records of wagtail sightings in the Chagos could be found, Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* has now been positively identified on Diego Garcia (C Patrick pers comm. - details to be published), and the finding of a lone Yellow Wagtail, albeit on a slightly later date than might be expected, is not exceptional.

Habitat

The habitat of Diego Garcia has changed little between 1997 and 2005 and it is very encouraging from a conservation point of view to find that Barton Point IBA complete with the three lagoon islets remains off limits to all. The Boxing Day tsunami had little visible affect on Diego Garcia save surging over a 100m area of the eastern side in the vicinity of the Plantation, and that appears to have caused little long-term damage.

On the western arm of the horseshoe a tented city to accommodate troops in transit has grown in the Point Marianne area; this has altered this once excellent shorebird habitat beyond recognition and is probably why Cattle Egret are not breeding in the trees in the hinterland of the Point.

Also on the western side, several man-made 'designated' wetlands were found alongside the airfield road in 1997 and are still sign-posted in 2005 as Wetland A, B etc. Bruner pointed out in the NAVSUPPFAC Management Plan in 1995 that these wetlands will require management

to prevent emergent growth choking them out. In 1996 and 1997 these artificial wetlands were havens for migrant waders and were the regular haunt of a vagrant Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, feeding marsh terns and breeding waterhens (Carr 1996, 2000). In 2005 there were no open expanses of freshwater as emergent growth had indeed taken over all of the pools.

It would be a relatively easy job to mechanically "scrape" the pools of vegetative growth to reopen them as a food source for a variety of species and return them to what was possibly their original purpose - to be a wildlife refuge.

Tough surveying techniques! Barton Point IBA, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* Steve Copsey.

Summary

The fact that RNBWS has been financially, and to a degree intellectually, sponsored by both the Overseas Territories Environmental Programme and the RSPB has led to a quantum leap forward in the development of RNBWS overseas expeditions. With respect to the Chagos Archipelago RNBWS is in a privileged position, having had a long involvement with the Chagos through ships visiting and personnel either serving or visiting the area on duty and, most important, recording their ornithological findings in *Sea Swallow* over the past 46 years. (*Sea Swallow* contains more ornithological notes on the Chagos than any other journal in the world). The 1997 RNBWS expedition to Diego Garcia laid the foundation for the 2005 expedition to continue this tradition of contributing to the ornithological knowledge of the area and to take matters forward.

The records gathered by the 2005 expedition, whilst enhancing the scant knowledge of the Chagos, have also given rise to many more questions. Having an accurate count of the

number of breeding seabirds from within Barton Point IBA and having knowledge of what stage of breeding these populations are at is an excellent starting point for future reference, but it does not answer the question of what triggers breeding or whether there are breeding spikes throughout the year; or if indeed the birds breed annually. Furthermore, the excellent series of sightings of migrants that have been rarely recorded in the past, while it has added to our knowledge of those species, still cannot tell us what the actual status of these birds is. Only repeat trips, conducting surveys of the breeding birds using credible ecological census techniques and diligently recording and publishing all of the survey results and general sightings will eventually unravel some of the ornithological conundrums surrounding the Chagos.

Recommendations

• A further survey, utilising the same methodology as this expedition should be conducted in either November or December, in order to gather more data on the breeding cycles of the seabirds of Barton Point IBA, particularly the Red-footed Booby.
• Now that Barton Point has an accurate start point of data, the same process should be repeated for the remaining nine Important Bird Areas of the Chagos.
• All ornithologists visiting Diego Garcia and the other atolls should be urged to record and publish all their sightings in order to assist in building up a complete picture of the avifauna of the Chagos Archipelago.
• The designated areas of wetland surrounding the airfield on Diego Garcia should be cleared of emerging vegetation.

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ANNEX A – SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SIGHTINGS

Wedge-tailed Shearwater ***Puffinus pacificus***
A single bird was seen offshore during a sea watch from Horsburgh Point on 28 May. Whilst this is likely to be the first record from the mainland of Diego Garcia its sighting is not unexpected as this species has been recorded extensively from the waters of the Chagos (Bourne, 1971) and has been confirmed as breeding on four atolls in the in the Chagos Bank by Baldwin (1975).

Audubon's Shearwater ***Procellaria lherminieri***
A single bird alighted from the water 10 metres in front of a small fishing boat used by the expedition on 2 June. This bird was in among a feeding flock of 200 plus mixed noddies. This species has been shown to be breeding on the Chagos Bank by Baldwin (1975) and has been recorded from Diego Garcia before by Howells (1983) who tells of an individual that stunned itself by flying in to an umbrella at Port Control on 22 March 1983 and was identified from photographs. There are also numerous records from ships operating within the Chagos area (Bourne 1971).

Wilson's Storm Petrel ***Oceanites oceanicus***
Two birds were recorded during a sea watch from Eclipse Point on 31 May. This species' migration pattern leads it to be expected wandering through the central Indian Ocean. It has been noted from ships operating throughout the entire Chagos, including the waters west of Diego Garcia by Curtis (1975) and the seas around Eagle Island by Pocklington (1967).

Yellow-billed Tropicbird ***Phaëthon lepturus***
This was the only species of tropicbird recorded, and was seen in pairs or as singletons throughout Diego Garcia on most days. Recorded by Hutson (1975) and Howells (1983) from Diego Garcia, this species has been recorded as breeding on Diego Garcia (Gadow 1907) as well as Peros Banhos and in the Salomon group by Symens (1999).

Brown Booby ***Sula leucogaster***
Three adults were found on East Island on 31 May. Brown Booby has been seen on the lagoon islets previously (Carr 1998) and has been confirmed breeding from the Chagos Bank (Baldwin 1975) and Peros Banhos (Symens 1999).

Red-footed Booby ***Sula sula***
The most numerous breeding seabird on Diego Garcia, the survey of the IBA assessed the breeding population in May 2005 to be 4370 pairs. Red-footed Booby is the most widespread of the breeding seabirds of the Chagos and has been recorded breeding in all months (Carr 1998) and has been noted as a breeding species from all island groups throughout the Chagos (Symens 1999).

Great Frigatebird ***Fregata minor***
Seen daily around Diego Garcia, the largest concentration was a mixed age group of 50 birds loafing on East Island on 31 May. Only recorded as a breeding species on North Brother in the Chagos Bank atolls (Baldwin 1975), it is likely that it breeds elsewhere throughout the region.

Lesser Frigatebird ***Fregata ariel***
Less numerous than the preceding species, Lesser Frigatebirds were seen daily in numbers of less than ten in the air from all areas of Diego Garcia. Reported as breeding in small numbers on Nelson Island (Baldwin 1975) and the Salomon group (Gadow 1907), it is common throughout the area.

Lesser Black-backed Gull ***Larus fuscus***
A single adult flew low over the accommodation area on 26 May. This species has been recorded once before from the Chagos by Hirons in 1972. That Joint Service Expedition recorded one 'tame' bird in winter plumage, thought to have accompanied a supply ship to Egmont Atoll in November (Bellamy 1979).

White-winged Black Tern ***Chlidonias leucopterus***
Two winter plumage White-winged Black Tern were present on Diego Garcia throughout the survey period and were always found with a small flock of White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa*. Cdr N J P Wraith RN a former British Representative on Diego Garcia reported seeing this species in March 1995 (Symens 1996) and Carr (1996) reported 19 'marsh terns' on 27 March 1996 that Dr Bill Bourne commented were likely to be this species.

Gull-billed Tern ***Gelochelidon nilotica***
A lone adult bird in non-breeding plumage was seen on several days on the lagoons at the southern end of the horseshoe. This is the first record of this species from the Chagos.

'Commic' Tern ***Sterna hirundo/paradisaea***
One bird seen on 26 May could not be specifically identified but was one of the above species.

Arctic Tern ***Sterna paradisaea***
Fifteen sightings were recorded throughout the survey period, thought to represent at least 10 individual birds; all were in non-breeding plumage except for 3 immature birds recorded in the Turtle Cove area on 31 May. This species has been recorded from Diego Garcia previously (Symens 1996, Carr 1998) and should be expected in small numbers due to its transoceanic migration pattern.

Roseate Tern ***Sterna dougalii***
A single bird in immature plumage was noted in the Turtle Cove area on 31 May and an adult in non-breeding garb was recorded at Sharks Cove on 1 and 2 June. This species has been recorded from Diego Garcia previously by Hutson (1975), Carr (1996, 1998) and Symens (1996) and appears to be a regular passage migrant.

White-cheeked Tern ***Sterna repressa***
A maximum of 9 winter plumage White-cheeked Tern were present on Diego Garcia throughout the survey period. The majority of sightings were from the sewage plant on the outskirts of the accommodation area where birds were photographed dip feeding and roosting on steel cables in a most unlike *Sterna*- tern way. This is a new species for the Chagos.

Black-naped Tern ***Sterna sumatrana***
This species was frequently seen in flocks of up to 30 in undisturbed lagoons or loafing on sandy beaches, particularly where spits occur to roost on. Black-naped Tern has been proved to be breeding within the Barton Point IBA on West Island and also on atolls within the Chagos Bank, Peros Banhos and Salomon group (Bourne 1971, Baldwin 1975, Symens 1999).

Bridled Tern ***Sterna anaethetus***
A single bird was recorded offshore from Eclipse Point on 29 May and a further 11 were seen from the same vantage point the following day. A visit to the three islets in the lagoon produced another 11 birds on 31 May. This species has been recorded as breeding on the atolls of the Chagos Bank (Baldwin 1975, Symens 1999) and it may breed elsewhere throughout the archipelago.

Sooty Tern ***Sterna fuscata***
One bird was recorded offshore from Eclipse Point on 30 May. Formerly bred in thousands on Diego Garcia (Bourne 1886, Finsch, in Bourne 1971), Loustau-Lalanne (1962) found this species breeding in small numbers in December on four atolls of Peros Banhos; Baldwin (1975) records some 14000 pairs breeding on South Brother in January 1975 and Symens (1999) found them breeding in their thousands on atolls of the Chagos Bank and Peros Banhos in February and March 1996.

Little Tern ***Sterna albifrons albifrons/sinensis***
An adult was found at Point Marianne on 26 May, an immature was seen at Turtle Cove on 28 May; 29 May found eight adults, two immature birds and a juvenile at various localities; a further adult was noted from Observation Point on 30 May and finally two further birds were recorded at Turtle Cove on 31 May. With the exception of a single bird that has been identified from photographs as being of the subspecies *sinensis*, all birds were assessed as being the nominate subspecies. Evidence of Little Tern breeding on Diego Garcia is supplied by Bruner (1995) and Symens (1999) who found four pairs on Diego Garcia in 1996.

Saunders' Little Tern ***Sterna saundersi***
An adult in non-breeding plumage was watched and photographed at Turtle Cove on 28 May 05. Dr W.R.P. Bourne (Howells 1983) suggested that the Little Tern *sp.* recorded by Howells on Diego Garcia in 1982 were this (then sub) species. The 2005 RNBWS record constitutes the first confirmed record for the Chagos.

Crested Tern ***Sterna bergii***
Regularly seen in any suitable habitat throughout the survey period; 53 were recorded on 26 May, 33 of these from Observation Point. Crested Tern has been recorded as a breeding species on Diego Garcia by Cochrane (1992) and Symens (1999); Symens also found them breeding on the Chagos Bank and Peros Banhos.

Lesser Crested Tern ***Sterna bengalensis***
Two birds of this species were recorded and photographed at Turtle Cove on 31 May and again at Sharks Cove on 1 June. Lesser Crested Tern is plainly not a common species in the Chagos as it has only been thought to have been seen by Lt Odling-Smee from Diego Garcia when

he visited in HMS *Dampier* in late July-early August 1960 (in Bourne 1966), and by Hutson (1975) who records them as being present on Diego Garcia in April and May 1971.

Brown Noddy ***Anous stolidus***
This species was breeding on West Island where a minimum of 128 pairs were found breeding, all of the nests located containing a single egg. It is a common species around Diego Garcia and can be viewed in flight all over the atoll. The limited historical ornithological data show that this species has been found nesting throughout the entire year from all of the atoll groups within the Chagos.

Lesser Noddy ***Anous tenuirostris***
Lesser Noddy was found breeding on Middle Island where some 30-50 pairs were recorded nesting in the under-storey of tall shrubs. Delightfully tame, the breeding birds would 'hover' around their nests until the intruder had passed. Possibly not as numerous as the preceding species, Symens (1999) records them as breeding on East Island within Barton Point IBA, the Peros Banhos group and the Salomon group; Baldwin (1975) notes them breeding in their thousands on atolls of the Chagos Bank.

White Tern ***Gygis alba***
Common all over Diego Garcia, this is the only seabird that regularly breeds on the atoll in any number outside the IBA; it is particularly numerous around the accommodation area where it roosts semi-colonially in numbers of 40-60 each evening. This is a common breeding resident on all island groups and appears to have a continuous breeding season.

Little Egret ***Egretta garzetta***
One or possibly two individuals were present on the atoll throughout the survey and were photographed. Very wary, Little Egret was only found in the muddy saline lagoon areas, a habitat not normally utilised by the resident Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*. Evidence suggests that Little Egret is an uncommon species in the Chagos with only one previous record of up to six birds amongst Cattle Egret and a Great White Egret at Point Marianne in March 1996 (Carr 1997).

Cattle Egret ***Bubulcus ibis***
The population on Diego Garcia throughout the survey period was estimated to be 30-50 birds. The breeding colony that existed at Point Marianne (Carr 1998) had been deserted. A new breeding colony was found on West Island that contained six nests and had a spread of laying and hatching dates (nests with eggs 3, nests with small dependant chicks 2 and nearly fully fledged chicks 1).

Little Green Heron ***Butorides striatus***
Noted daily from all around Diego Garcia especially from along the shoreline where it feeds in exposed rock pools. A total of 30 were recorded on 30 May including 14 birds feeding along a six-kilometre stretch of ocean-side coast within the Barton Point IBA.

Domestic Fowl ***Gallus gallus***
Noted in healthy numbers from areas of accommodation, one family party was seen at the

Arial Farm at the southern point of the horseshoe at least eight kilometres from any human habitation on 31 May. On Diego Garcia it breeds throughout the year.

White-breasted Waterhen ***Amaurornis phoenicurus***
Noted daily in fresh water wetlands; the population appears unchanged since the 1997 survey (Carr 2000). A single dependant juvenile was noted on 26 May, strengthening the hypothesis that species breeds throughout the year on Diego Garcia. This natural colonist may now occur on other atolls of the Chagos that contain freshwater margins.

Pacific Golden Plover ***Pluvialis fulva***
Noted on three days; two birds were recorded at Horsburgh Point on 30 May, a single in the Turtle Cove area on 31 May and a further single at Horsburgh Point on 2 June. All of the sightings were of winter plumaged birds and may relate to just two birds. Likely to have been first recorded by Hirons (1973) from Egmont Atoll and recorded as Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, it was positively identified from Diego Garcia in 1995 (Symens 1996). The only other records come from the RNBWS survey in 1997 (Carr 2000).

Grey Plover ***Pluvialis squatarola***
A maximum of 10 birds were present throughout the survey period. All were in non-breeding plumage and were normally to be found on the lagoons at the southern end of the atoll. This species has been recorded by several of the ornithologists who have visited this area and is known to remain on Diego Garcia throughout the northern breeding season.

Lesser Sandplover ***Charadrius mongolus***
One bird was found on 29 May and a further two on 2 June, all sightings coming from the lagoons at the southern end of the atoll. Hirons (1973) first recorded this species from the Chagos when he regularly saw them on the Joint Services Expedition to Egmont Island in 1972/73 and found a maximum of eight on 4 January 1973; the only other record is from Diego Garcia in March 1995 (Symens 1996).

Greater Sandplover ***Charadrius leschenaulti***
Recorded daily from the lagoons at the southern end of the atoll, the maximum count was 19 on 27 May. This species has been recorded by several of the other ornithologists who have visited the Chagos and has been recorded over-summering.

Bar-tailed Godwit ***Limosa lapponica***
A maximum of four non-breeding plumage birds were noted from the lagoons at the southern end of the atoll throughout the survey period. As with most of the other waders recorded in the Chagos, the Bar-tailed Godwit appears to occur in low numbers throughout the Northern Hemisphere winter with some individuals remaining over summer.

Whimbrel ***Numenius phaeopus***
Noted daily from the lagoons at the southern end of the atoll, the maximum count was 16 on 29 May. Whimbrel is one of the most numerous and widespread of the waders to occur in the Chagos and has been recorded by most ornithologists who have visited the area.

Spotted Redshank ***Tringa erythropus***
Two birds in non-breeding plumage were recorded from the lagoons behind Horsburgh Point on 27 May. The only other record for the Chagos is of two birds on Diego Garcia on 19 and 21 March 1995 (Symens 1996).

Marsh Sandpiper ***Tringa stagnatilis***
Two birds were found on the lagoons behind Horsburgh Point on 30 May. The only other record of this species from the Chagos is by Curtis (1975) who recorded an individual on Ile Boddam in the Salomon group on 8 October 1974.

Common Greenshank ***Tringa nebularia***
The maximum count was five on 2 June, four of these being together on the lagoons behind Horsburgh Point. Historical records suggest this is a widespread and regular northern hemisphere winter visitor to the Chagos with some individuals remaining over summer.

Terek Sandpiper ***Xenus cinereus***
Two birds were seen on the lagoons behind Horsburgh Point on 28 May and a further three individuals were seen there on 2 June. This species has only been recorded once before in the Chagos by Hutson (1975), who sighted two birds on Diego Garcia on 23 and 24 April 1971.

Ruddy Turnstone ***Arenaria interpres***
Noted daily from the lagoons at the southern end of the atoll, the maximum count was 39 on 27 May. Historical records suggest this species is another widespread and numerous northern hemisphere winter visitor to the entire archipelago, with some individuals remaining over summer.

Sanderling ***Calidris alba***
Sanderling were sighted on three days on the lagoons behind Horsburgh Point, the maximum being five birds on 30 May. Historical evidence suggests this species is a regular visitor to the entire Chagos (Hirons 1973, Baldwin 1975), particularly by Howells who spent twelve months on Diego Garcia and records them as "seen very commonly".

Red-necked Stint ***Calidris ruficollis***
An adult and juvenile were noted at Sharks Cove on 27 May, probably the same two birds were seen at Horsburgh Point on 28 May and two adults with a juvenile plumage bird were at Horsburgh Point on 29 May. Two previous records exist from the Chagos: both from Diego Garcia: Symens (1996) found two non-breeding plumage birds on 20 March 1995 in amongst 20 Little Stint *Calidris minuta* and the 1997 RNBWS found one non-breeding plumage individual in amongst 60 Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* on 16 August 1996 (Carr 2000).

Curlew Sandpiper ***Calidris ferruginea***
The most numerous wader encountered on the expedition. On 28 May, 96 were found on the lagoons to the rear of Horsburgh Point, one being in partial summer plumage; a further 10 birds were at the Aerial Farm. The total number of birds on Diego Garcia throughout the

Curlew Sandpiper *(Calidris ferruginea)*. Diego Garcia. Indian Ocean. May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

survey period was in the region of 130 birds. A non-breeding species, Curlew Sandpiper is the most numerous and widespread wader to visit the Chagos and has been recorded in all months by observers who have visited the area.

Indian Barred Ground-dove *Geopelia striata*
This introduced species appears to retain a healthy population and there appears no change in numbers from the 1997 RNBWS survey (Carr 2000). An estimate of the population on Diego Garcia in May 2005 is 70-100 pairs. Its status throughout the rest of the Chagos remains uncertain.

Madagascar Turtle Dove *Streptopelia picturata*
This species has an unknown provenance in the Chagos, for the present resident breeding population derives from unknown stock. The population remains no different from 1997 (Carr 2000); an estimate being in the region of 50-70 pairs.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava ssp*
A single bird was found by Lt Cdr Gary Lewis RN feeding on the short grass of the accommodation area on the afternoon that the expedition was due to leave Diego Garcia (2 June). The bird alighted and departed north calling and was not found again despite much searching. No sub-specific identification could be made from the views that were had.

Indian Mynah *Acridotheres tristis*
This species remains common throughout Diego Garcia though it was difficult to make an accurate assessment of the total population. It was thought there were over 300 birds on the atoll in May 2005.

Madagascar Fody *Foudia madagascariensis*
Madagascar Fody is a very common and widespread species throughout the entire atoll. An accurate count of the population would be difficult to achieve, but it was estimated that the population on Diego Garcia was over 300 birds in May 2005.

ANNEX B – PROPOSED STATUS OF SPECIES OBSERVED IN MAY 2005

Status:

R	Resident
WV	Primarily Northern Winter Visitor
SV	Primarily Northern Summer Visitor
O	Occasional (not seasonal or too few records to assess from)

Abundance:

These figures are annual expectations for the Chagos.

A	Abundant (1000-10000+)
C	Common (100-1000)
UC	Uncommon (10-100)
V	Vagrant (0-10)

SPECIES	STATUS	ABUNDANCE	COMMENT
Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*	R	A	Breeds Chagos Bank and Peros Banhos
Audubon's Shearwater *Procellaria lherminieri*	R	A	Breeds Chagos Bank and Peros Banhos
Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*	O	UC	
Yellow-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*	R	C	Likely to breed throughout Chagos
Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*	R	A	Breeds Chagos Bank and Peros Banhos
Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*	R	A	Likely to breed throughout Chagos
Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor*	R	A	Breeds Chagos Bank
Lesser Figatebird *Fregeta ariel*	R	C	Possibly abundant
Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*	O	V	Possibly WV
White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*	WV	UC	Possibly vagrant
Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*	WV	V	
Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*	O	UC	
Roseate Tern *Sterna dougalii*	O	UC	
White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa*	O	V	May be WV and UC
Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*	R	C	Likely breeds throughout Chagos in small numbers
Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*	R	C	Breeds Chagos Bank, records indicate UC
Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*	R	A	Breeds Chagos Bank and Peros Banhos
Little Tern *Sterna albifrons albifrons*	R	C	Breeds Diego Garcia, may be UC
Saunders' Little Tern *Sterna saundersi*	O	V	
Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*	R	C	Likely breeds throughout Chagos in small numbers
Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*	O	V	
Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*	R	A	
Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*	R	A	
White Tern *Gygis alba*	R	A	
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*	WV	V	May be occasional
Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*	R	UC	Formerly common. Only breeds on Diego Garcia
Little Green Heron *Butorides striatus*	R	C	Likely breeds throughout Chagos in small numbers
Domestic Fowl *Gallus gallus*	R	C	Formerly resident through out Chagos, status now
White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*	R	C	May now have breed away from Diego Garcia
Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*	WV	UC	Some remain throughout northern summer
Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*	WV	UC	Some remain throughout northern summer
Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus*	WV	V	
Greater Sandplover *Charadrius leschenaulti*	WV	UC	Some remain throughout northern summer
Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*	WV	V	
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*	WV	C	Some remain throughout northern summer
Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*	O	V	Likely WV
Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*	O	V	Likely WV
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*	WV	UC	Some remain throughout northern summer
Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*	O	V	Likely WV
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*	WV	C	Some remain throughout northern summer
Sanderling *Calidris alba*	WV	UC	
Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*	O	V	Likely WV
Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*	WV	C	Some remain throughout northern summer
Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava ssp*	O	V	
Indian Barred Ground-dove *Geopelia striata*	R	C	Status uncertain outside of Diego Garcia
Madagascar Turtle Dove *Streptopelia picturata*	R	C	Status uncertain outside of Diego Garcia
Indian Mynah *Acridotheres tristis*	R	A	Presumed to have spread to all other atolls
Madagascar Fody *Foudia madagascariensis*	R	A	Presumed to have spread to all other atolls

White-cheeked Tern *(Sterna repressa)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

White Tern *(Gygis alba)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

White-cheeked Tern *(Sterna repressa)* and White-winged Black Tern *(Childonia leucopterus)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Red-necked Stint *(Calidris ruficollis)*. Diego Garcia. Indian Ocean. May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Little Egret *(Egretta garzetta)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Little Tern *(Sterna albifrons sinensis)*. Turtle Cove, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Red-footed Booby *(Sula sula)*. Middle Island, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Brown Noddy *(Anous stolidus)*. West Island, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Black-naped Terns *(Sterna sumatrana) and Lesser Crested Tern (Sterna bengalensis)*. Turtle Cove, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Great Frigatebird *(Fregata minor)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Saunder's Little Tern *(Sterna saundersi)*. Turtle Cove, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Gull-billed Tern *(Gelochelidon nilotica)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Bar-tailed Godwit *(Limosa lapponica)*. Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

LANDBIRDS FROM SHIPS AT SEA 1997-1999

Analysed by Stan Howe (in consultation with Michael Casement) MET LOG reports not previously published are listed here, in the same format as previous years (see *Sea Swallows* 48: 24-35 and 49: 27).

SECTION A - EAST ATLANTIC (EAST of 30°W), BAY OF BISCAY and IBERLANT, also IRISH SEA

1998

A flock of migrating geese on track for Iceland (sp. undetermined) seen SW Barra (56° 20'N 9° 06'W) from FPV *Vigilant* on 18 Apr. On 2 Oct a small raptor was photographed on board the same vessel (56° 21N 9° 07W) despatching a Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*; **(Comment by MBC** - this was probably a Merlin *Falco columbarius*) This week had been marked by large numbers of migrant geese, pipits and falcons. A Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* landed briefly on the starboard bridge of *MV Maersk* Somerset on 16 Oct at 31° 42'N 29° 28'W, about 320nm south of Azores. A Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* was examined in hand and photographed on board in Biscay on 4 Nov at 4° 25'N 7° 25'W.

1999

MV Seki Pine reported a 3rd yr male Blackcap *Sylvia atricapillus* (examined in hand) on board in North Biscay at 48° 52'N 5° 05'W on 23 March. On 30 April in Biscay (47° 09'N 5° 48'W) a Whimbrel *Numenius phaopus* was resting on board. In South Biscay (44° 07'N 9°16'W) on 1 May three more Whimbrels were on board and photographed.

SECTION B - ENGLISH CHANNEL, NORTH SEA, NORWEGIAN SEA and BALTIC

1997

A swan (probably a Whooper *Cygnus cygnus?*) seen flying low overhead FPV *Vigilant* when NE of Sula Sgeir (59° 20'N 7° 15'W) on 5 Dec..

1999

A Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* rested on board MV *Matco Clyde* for 15 mins on 13 May at 55° 16'N 0° 27'E, about 60nm off Newcastle in passage from Le Havre to Buckie. The bird appeared to fly off in the direction of land.

SECTION C - WEST ATLANTIC (WEST OF 30° W)

No reports.

SECTION D - GULF OF MEXICO and CARIBBEAN

1998

A possible Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* was seen aboard MT *Eagle* during night of 22 Nov in Yucatan Channel (22° 30'N 86° 22'W).

SECTION E - MEDITERRANEAN 1999

MV *Seki Pine* (Captain P.W. Jackson, Master, and member RNBWS) reported a number of

interesting migrants during the period 29 March and 12 May: House Martin *Delichon urbica* between Corsica and France (42° 45'N 7°05'E) on 29 March. Two Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* landed north of Corsica (43° 10'N 8° 05'E) on 18 April; and 40 Black Kites *Milvus migrans* flying north about 200'asl across Gibraltar Straits (36N° +5° 27W) on 22 April.

On 1 May MV *Seki Pine* reported four Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* in Barcelona Approaches (41° 20'N 2° 10'E); two more with two Turtle Doves and a Grasshopper *Warbler Locustlla naevia* at 42° 30'N 6° 40'E am on 6th, then eight Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustice* and 10 House Martin on board in fog pm on 6th at 42° 46'N 7° 38'E. At 2am on 7th at 43° 21 'N 9° 47'E a European Bee-eater *Merops apiasrer* was sighted clearly in the ship's floodlights. Next morning (8th) at 41°45'N4°03'E a Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* was aboard; also a Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* and eight Turtle Doves, followed shortly by another European Bee-eater (photos), a Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* and a Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* just before berthing at Barcelona. Early on the 12th a Little Egret Egretta garzetra spent a couple of minutes on board west of Majorca (39°38'N1°45'W). Ajuv. Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* aboard in CPO's cabin some 26nm from Corsica (4°04'N 8°46'E), where it was caught, photographed and examined in the hand prior to release

SECTION F - RED SEA and GULF OF ADEN

No reports.

SECTION G - INDIAN OCEAN and ARABIAN SEA

1998

Unidentified Egret/Heron types reported by MV *Al Shuhadaa* - at 11°16'N 54°38'E on 31 Oct. (probable Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis?*), and at 12°23'S 41°41'E on 5 Nov (a possible Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea?*).

1999

On 23 March, passing through the Maldives 8-degree channel (7°14'N 73°53'E), MV *Repulse Bay* reported radar reflection from a flock (2 cables in diameter) of unidentified birds travelling north-east (ie towards Kerala) low over the water at 4 knots. A Blackbird *Turdus merula* was photographed on board MV *Colombo Bay* on 6 April in Lakshadweep Sea (701'N 76°12'E) during a thunderstorm. [This species breeds southeast to Sri Lanka]

SECTION H - PERSIAN GULF and GULF OF OMAN

No reports

SECTION I - PACIFIC, CHINA SEA, YELLOW SEA, CORAL SEA and PHILIPPINE SEA

1998

A possible juvenile Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* seen perched on crane of MV *Tasman* Spirit when 500nm north of Galapagos (8°14'N 93°14'W) on 23 Nov.

SECTION J - SOUTH ATLANTIC

1997

On 14 July MV *British Resource* was waiting in the Gulf of Biafra (3°40'N7°:5 1'E) to berth at an offshore terminal, when a bird was seen circling low over the sea to starboard with long white streamers to its wings. A drawing confirms it as a Pennant-winged Nightjar *Macrodipteryx vexilitria*. **(COMMENT by SH**. This is a first 'at sea' report and an unusual one at that for the RNBWS database. Dr Peter Jones (Edinburgh University), the bird recorder for the Gulf of Guinea islands, has no records for Principe and San Tome but believes the Pennant-wing Nightjar is rarely seen on Bioko. It is an intra-African migrant that nests south of the Equator (from Angola) but winters north of the Equator in Nigeria/Cameroon. This record suggests it may cross the Gulf of Guinea on migration.]

1999

On 28 Feb, whilst surveying 20nm off Ivory Coast MV *Geo Prospector* was host to an exhausted Swift *Apus sp.* that spent the night on board (in a violent thunderstorm) after having circled the ship during the afternoon. It was described as overall sooty dark chocolate brown with a pale throat patchy length estimated c.140mm - photo taken. Probably a Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*.

LAND BIRDS OVER THE CASPIAN SEA, 1997-1998
Observations by Chief Engineer S J Hingston MN
Analysed by Michael Casement and Stan Howe

During 1997/98 Stewart Hingston (SJH) served in the Azerbaijan Chirag-Gunushli (ACG) Oilfield on the safety standby vessel MV *Tabriz Khalilbeyli*, operating out of Baku. First oil flowed from the Chirag-1 platform in November 1997. Positioned at 40° 05'N 51° 15'E, 48nm ESE the Aspheron peninsula (Maps 1 & 2), SJH was able to record the year round occurrence of landbirds in the southern Caspian Sea (here at it's narrowest of *c*.100nm, but still >150nm north of the Iranian coast). This position lies on a major migration path from Central Palaearctic Russia through the head of the Arabian Gulf down into the Horn of Africa, and this is reflected in the seasonal pattern of SJH records (Fig.1 Chart).

Map 1 - Position of Caspian Sea showing importance of major migration route from Central Russia to East Africa. (Map adapted by F Ward).

Map 2 - Caspian Sea
(Map adapted by F Ward).

Between 20 Apr'97 and 31 Dec'98 SJH spent a total of 343 days in this area, completing 65 RNBWS record sheets (38 in 1997 and 27 in 1998). The highlights of the 1997 records have already appeared, together with several photos, in MBC annual analysis of landbirds from ships at sea in *Sea Swallow* 48: 32-35, and Bill Bourne included seabirds in his analysis *Sea Swallow* 48: 6-23. There is some duplication here because WRPB included grebes in his table (p23) whereas MBC classified them as landbirds in accordance with the *Sea Swallow Checklist of Seabirds*, produced for RNBWS in 1996. Brief mention of the 1998 records appear in *Sea Swallow* 49: 27-29 where MBC wrote that 'These records are exemplary, complete with weather data and identification details' and that SJH and MBC 'together with Stan Howe, have spent a considerable time inputting these records for both 1997 and 1998 into a computer database so that both years can be sorted electronically'.

Except in a few cases, where they are shown to illustrate the meticulous records kept by SJH, details of weather and identification are omitted for reasons of space. But these record sheets are fine examples of what is required to merit inclusion in *Sea Swallow*. As has been pointed out many times in these pages, long lists of landbird names, with imprecise positions (from nearest land) have little value for analysis of migration patterns, and unusual species do need accurate descriptions or photos if they are to be acceptable..

The scale and diversity of species involved in these migratory movements recorded by SJH is remarkable. To give but one example: During a period of NW winds (F5-7), on 7 Nov'97, SJH records: '0005-0045. Many birds seen and heard passing over and flying around vessel - passerines, waders and others - most unidentified'. From 0005-1400 'Numbers impossible to estimate but following positively identified or landed aboard':: 22 species including: Curlew (6), Dunlin (30+), Black-winged Stilt (20+), Redshank, Black-necked Grebe (5), Little Grebe (4), Black Stork (3), Quail (9), Coot (1), Sparrowhawk (4), Skylark (160+), Robin (5), Wren (1), Blackbird (2), Red-throated pipit (1), White Wagtail (5), Starling (100+), Rook (2), Chaffinch (18), Brambling (21) and House Sparrow.(6).

Some 600+ records of more than 125 species are summarised below - the graph indicates seasonal frequency of records by approx. 10-day periods. It is clear that migration across the central Caspian Sea does take place on a massive scale, in both spring and autumn. These observations are therefore important, and unique.

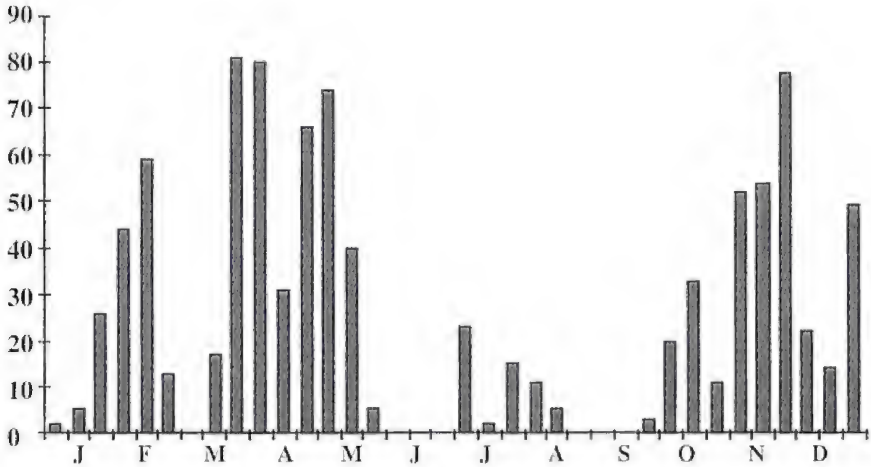

Figure 1 - Seasonal Frequency of records by 10 day periods

NOTE. Records plotted by thirds of a month to indicate the pattern of annual bird movement across the Caspian.
Note that some gaps arise from the observer not being continuously on station, and do not necessarily mean a lack of birds.

NON-PASSERINES: 57 species of non-passerine 'land birds' were recorded during 1997-1998, many being passage migrants (PM) but some apparently wintering in the Caspian region.

1. Little Grebe ***Tachybaptus ruficollis***: 1 record 1997.
Four seen on 7 Nov'97.

2. Red-necked Grebe ***Podiceps grisegena*****:** 17 records 1997/98.
A winter resident recorded in ones and twos from 6 Nov - 8 April. Mostly seen swimming and diving to feed close to the vessel/platform.

3. Great Crested Grebe ***Podiceps cristatus*****:** 20 records 1997/98.
A winter resident and PM recorded as singles up to a group of nine from 22 Nov - 10 Feb. Some feeding on sea close to vessel, others flying by low over sea.

4. Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*: 16 records 1997/98.
A winter resident recorded as singles up to a group of six from 22 Nov - 10 April. Mostly seen swimming and diving to feed close to the vessel/platform. Five found dead aboard am. 7 Nov (*Sea Swallow* 48: 35). Outside this period there is an unusual record of birds heard striking the mainmast at 0200 on 21 July'98; two were found dead on board later in the morning, whilst a third was found alive. When released it flew off strongly to SE.

5. Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: 10 records 1997/98.
Status irregular and uncertain, but seen occasionally throughout the year.. One perched on vessel handrails 12 April. Up to five fishing around vessel from 4-8 July. One or two fishing/ resting around vessel from 20-27 Dec. One reported in 1998 on 9 December.

6. Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: 3 records 1997/98.
Seen passing on spring migration (one on 29 March), [and eight unidentified egret sp. flying W low over sea on 21 Apr'97]. In autumn, five on 8 Nov, flying low over sea.

7. Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: 3 records 1997/98.
Two records of spring migrants. One resting on helideck on 3 March; a group of six battling low over waves into a northerly Force 7 wind on 31 March. An autumn bird moving S attempted to land on 4 Aug'97, but was scared off by helicopter.

8. Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*: 9 records 1997/98.
Six records of ones and twos during spring migration, 31 March - 28 April. Some circled platform, one reported aboard. A summer bird appeared on 4 July, and two autumn groups were seen on 4 Oct (4), and 24 Oct (3). The only other autumn report was of a single on 6 Nov'97.

9. **Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*:** 2 records 1998.
Status uncertain, possibly wandering non-breeders. Both records are of birds flying past in a SE direction, one on 9 April and two on 10 June.

10. Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*: 7 records 1997/98.
On migration. A male in breeding plumage found hiding under deck equipment on 4 May. A 2nd bird may have been present the same night. Another spring singleton was recorded on 6 May, whilst four records (six birds) were noted 7 Oct - 6 Nov.

11. Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*; 3 records 1997/98.
Seven were seen on 6 Nov'97 and three the next day, with another two on 25 Nov'98, all flying south low over the sea.

12. White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: 1 record 1998.
18 arrived in V-formation, used rig flare thermal to gain height for 10-mins, then departed S on passage.

13. Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*. 2 autumn records 1997.
Flocks flew past at *c*.15-20m a.s.l. heading S'ly on 20 Sept (53) and 4 Oct (26).

14. Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: 1 record 1998.
An immature seen swimming between vessel and rig during afternoon of 3 December.

15. Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: 1 record 1998.
A single at 1000 on 20 December.

16. Common Shelduck *Tadornsa tadorna*: 4 records 1998.
Three records of groups between 35 and 100 passing by or on sea around vessel between 30 Nov - 24 Dec. A single arrived from NW to flop down on sea by vessel on 22 July.

17. Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*: 3 records 1997/98.
Groups of four and 36 seen passing by on 26 and 30 Nov, both groups flying with the wind; the first group N, the latter S. Another was killed by colliding with accommodation unit at night on 19 Dec'97. (Photographed and presented to cook, subsequently to appear on evening menu!)

18. European Wigeon *Anas penelope* (U). 4 records 1998.
Unidentified ducks, seen on passage on four occasions between 22 Nov - 4 Dec, in numbers between 22 and 60. Usually passing in small groups in the distance; one group thought possibly to be this species.

19. Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* (U): 1 record 1997.
Single on 6 Oct, flying slowly past heading S. An unidentified harrier, possibly this species, was sighted earlier at 1230 on 4 October.

20. Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: 10 records 1997/98.
Singles, (up to groups of 42 and 80) passing or landing briefly on board from 16 Oct - 4 Dec. One interacted with gulls on 6 Nov'98; an adult female took, plucked and ate a Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* on board on 16th. One landed on board and interacted with a Buzzard on 25 April'97.

21. Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*: 5 records 1997/98.
On five occasions - 8 Jan (22), 3 April (1), 3 Oct (3), 7 Oct (1) and 25 Nov (one in company with two Black Storks) - accipiters, possibly this species, seen soaring over platform.

22. Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus*: 7 records 1997/98.
Migrants recorded between 5 April and 2 May then on 4-5 Nov. Passing in small groups, with as many as 36 seen in a day. Individuals often roosted on board overnight. Some arrived low over sea, then used the platform's flare thermals to soar high out of sight.

23. Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: 2 records 1997.
Single aboard on 1 May'97 during a rain shower, in company with Steppe Buzzards. A group of seven seen on 15 May.

24. Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*: 1 record 1998.
One landed on oil platform at 1700 on 22 Nov, after struggling into a NW/6 wind.

25. Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*: 1 record 1998.
A group of seven reported on 16 May.

26. Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomerina* (U): 2 records 1998.
Single migrating 'eagles' reported at a distance on 6 April and 4 Nov. thought to be this species. Spring bird exhibited a laboured flap and glide flight 10m above the sea.

27. Osprey *Pandion haliaetus:* 2 records 1998.
Singles seen on 8 and 20 October.

28. Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: 17 records 1997/98.
Migrants recorded in spring between 19 March - 28 April, and in autumn from 26 Nov - 25 Dec. The earliest autumn record (of five) on 26 Sept'97, otherwise singles (once two, once three together) seen passing low over water, or sometimes perching and resting on board. In summer, one was seen resting on ship on 18 July'97.

29. Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: 1 record 1997.
One landed on board at 1400 arriving from S on 1 May. Disturbed by crew-members and flew off W'ly after 4-5 minutes.

31. Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*: 3 records 1997.
Two circled vessel for 10 minutes before departing NW on 27 April. A single appeared on 20 and 21 October.

32. Peregrine / Lanner Falcon *Falco biarnicus / peregrinus*: (U) 1 record 1997.
Two possibles on 29 Oct arr. from SW to NE (Wind NNE/6). "Thought to be immatures, flew close past vessel in poor light just on dark. Large well-built falcon with what looked like dark brown mantles, both flying just metres above waves".

33. Common Quail *Coturnix cotornix*: 3 records 1997.
Autumn birds occurred between 6 Oct – 7 Nov (as many as nine)

34. Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata:* 1 record 1997.
An unusual visitor to an offshore platform: it flew around making no attempt to land, before heading off SE on 20 October.

35. Common Coot *Fulica atra*: 2 records 1997.
Two autumn singles on 28 Sept and 7 November.

36. Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*: 5 records 1997/98.
Migrants recorded between 24 Sept – 19 Dec. Found on 3 occasions hiding on deck in the morning, two examined in the hand (BEH form). The fourth bird (a rail, probably this species) was seen to be attacked and killed over the sea by two Armenian Gulls at 0740 on 24 Nov'98.

37. Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*: 2 records 1997.
Summer singles on 6 and 7 July.

38. Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*: 1 record 1997/98.
A single heard calling and seen flying low over sea, S to N, at 1015 on 27 March. Another six reported at 0010 on 7 Nov'97.

39. Common Redshank *Tringa totanpus*: 1 record 1997.
Reported on 7 November, together with countless passerines.

40. Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*: 1 record 1998.
A singleton heard calling as it flew around vessel at 1230 on 6 July before departing N.

41. Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis:* 1 record 1997.
Around from 0715-0800 on 5 May. "Found resting on helideck, like a small Greenshank, long-legged, fine straight bill, face whitish. In flight, dark wings with contrasting white tail, rump, and wedge up back, white underparts, legs protruding well beyond tail in flight, black spotting on breast, clear on throat".

42. Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola:* 1 record 1997.
One reported on 27 July. "Single found perched on heli-deck at 1500, very tame and approachable, several photos taken."

43. Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*: 1 record 1998.
Two approached vessel low over water at 1300 on 22 July. Circled then briefly perched on mooring rope, trilling all the while. Flew off SW.

44. Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: 1 record 1997.
A flock of 30+ seen on 7 Nov.

45. Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: 1 record 1997.
A single at 1850-1910 on 15 July. First seen swimming alongside then flew aboard.

46. Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* : 1 record 1997.
Single on 5 May. "Watched approaching from S. very low over sea. Once aboard easily approached to within a few feet, and several photos taken. Present on helideck till dusk, sleeping most of time, gave impression utterly exhausted Underwing chestnut in flight". (wind was NW/4).

47. Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*: 1 record 1997.
A flock of 20+ on 7 Nov.

48. Rock Dove *Columba livia*: 1 record 1998.
A bird rested for 20 mins on foredeck during a F9 gale from NNW at 1300 on 11 December. Flew off S'ly.

49. European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur*: 7 records 1997.
Spring birds from 18 April- 8 May. One arrived on vessel from S, low over sea, at 1050 on 18 April. Transferred to oil platform when disturbed. Four autumn records 28 Sept - 24 October.

50. Eurasian Collared-dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: 4 records 1997/98.
One on 24 April, and two settled on board to roost at 1830 on 13 June. Other autumn records 30 Sept, and aboard 0730-1030 on 23 November.

51. Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*: 11 records 1997/98.
Commonest owl seen offshore here. Recorded in spring 15 March - 9 April, and in autumn 15 Oct - 29 November.

53. Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: 3 records 1997/98.
Autumn records from 6 Nov to 1 December, four individuals seeking to land or rest on board during am. Up to three birds a day seen briefly resting on vessel/platform, but very wary. Birds flying often harried by gulls.

54. European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*: 10 records 1997/98.
In 1997, five spring records of singles on 20 April - 14 May + 3 autumn singles 26 Sep - 8 Oct. In 1998, spring records of singles on 30 April - 3 May. Seen flying around vessel, one a male with white wing-spots.

55. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*: 5 records 1997.
Spring passage groups rested aboard - 15 on 25 April and four on 2 May. The first group were sheltering from a F8 wind, and one was caught in accommodation and released next morning; the later group interacted with a Steppe Buzzard on board and called noisily to each other. In autumn, groups appeared on 10 Aug (7) and 12 Aug (4).

56. European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*: 1 record 1997.
A spring single reported on 16 May.

57. Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*: 10 records 1997/98.
Singles (max six in a day) recorded in spring from 23 March to 18 May; and summer birds around 30 June and 25 July '98. Many rested on board vessel/platform but very timid. One flying was harried close to sea level by Lesser Black-backed Gulls; others also often interacted with gulls when in flight. No records between August and February.

PASSERINES: Strong passages of passerine species were recorded, many taking place at night, so all species involved were not determinable. Such events were mentioned in SJH reports during spring (March, April and May) and autumn (November), and they probably involved many of the nocturnal migratory species in the following list, which often were found in the morning fallout next day.

From radar observations in the Mediterranean in the 1960s (Casement 1966), it is highly probable that the birds landing briefly aboard the ship (and oil platform), are but a small fraction of the massive nocturnal passage of migrants taking place unseen, high overhead. But the species identified do give a very useful indication of the species involved.

Note has been taken of recent papers in the Journal of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME) Sandgrouse, giving helpful information about the breeding status of birds in

nearby Azerbaijan (Aspinall 2005) and Iran (Roth 2005). A total of 72 passerine species are listed opposite.

58. Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*: 7 records 1998.
One spring record in March, six autumn records in November. Many records were of singles aboard. A maximum of ten seen on 21 Nov, of which only one was aboard briefly, the rest flew past calling.

59. Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla:* 4 records 1998.
Spring records 29 March - 6 April. Up to six a day, with a few on board, some photographed.

60. Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*: 5/6 records 1998.
Spring migrant 16 March - 9 April. Up to ten in a day, several roosting on board with occasional corpses handled confirming identification.

61. Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: 46 records 1997/98.
A very common passage migrant. Spring records from 15 March - 4 April, with the autumn passage stretching from 5 Nov through to 7 January. Usually in small groups but occasionally up to 160 in a day. Often seen harried (one killed) by gulls as they flew low over the sea. One of several corpses found aboard was headless, possibly killed by owls that had been seen aboard the day before. Identification confirmed by wing sent to NHM, Tring.

62. Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: 17 records 1997/98.
Records of spring migrants from 20 March - 3 May. Mostly flying by or around vessel, but a few landed to rest briefly - numbers up to 40 in a day. Autumn records 9 Oct - 4 November.

63. Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*: 1 record 1997.
One reported on board on 4 May. 'Largish long-tailed pipit, long-legged with a more upright stance, bill also longish. Upperparts vaguely streaked darker very pale faintly streaked breast, broad white supercilium, wings sandy coloured'.

[Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*: Invalid i.d. 5 records plus 2 possibles. 1998.
Autumn birds recorded from 7-26 November 1998. One living bird and a corpse handled on board. Tail and wings of the dead bird submitted to NHM Tring for confirmation of i.d. established that these were *A. pratensis*. But in view of a recent record in Iran (Tobias Toth *et al* 2005) this species cannot entirely be ruled out. SH also comments on the absence from SJH log of any Tree Pipit *A. trivialis* sightings, a species which is a common Palaearctic-African migrant through Iran/Kuwait and might easily be confused with Olive-backed]

64. Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*: 11 records 1997/98.
Spring birds recorded from 17 April - 4 May. One BEH on 3 May '97. Autumn birds (originally thought to be Olive-backed Pipit *A. hodgsoni*) recorded 7-26 Nov '98. NHM have now pronounced at least one of these to be *A. pratensis*.

65. Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus:* 5 records 1997/98.
Spring records on 17 April and 4-5 May. Autumn records on 7 and 20 Nov. All identified on board.

66. White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*: 68 records 1997/98.
The most frequently recorded of all the migrants. 36 Spring records 18 March - 4 May, usually up to 'tens' per day trickling through, except for >300 in a mixed wagtail passage on 4 April. 42 autumn records 2 Aug – 22 Nov, beginning as a trickle, building up to 'tens' daily in Sept, then 'hundreds in Oct, before trailing off in Nov. In early Oct, daily peaks of 400+ were counted.

67. Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*: 4 records 1997/98.
Spring records from 4-6 April. An estimated 500 in the mixed Wagtail flock of 4 April, with a few small groups on board next day tailing off to two stragglers in a couple of days. Many males of nominate ssp. *citreola* recognised in full breeding plumage. Two autumn birds were seen at 1830 on 25 Sep'97

68. Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*: 29 records 1997/98.
Recorded abundant in spring 28 March - 6 May. From the distinctive males present, many were assigned by SJH to the Grey-headed (Scandinavian) ssp. *M. f. thunbergi*. Seen flying past in numbers up to 50 a day. A few landed on board. The only autumn records reported were of small parties - three on 11 Aug, and six on 12th.

69. Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: 3 records 1998.
Spring records from 29 March - 5 April, among mass passages of wagtails. One found dead (29 March), others rested on board in a heavy rain shower.

70. Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*: 1 record 1998.
A winter male (?) perched on board at 1230 on 14 January.

71. Grey Hypocolius *Hyopcolius ampelinus*: 1 record 1997.
Another unusual visitor offshore! One sheltered aboard on evening of 23 October.

72. Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: 2 records 1997/98
Single aboard most of morning 7 Nov'97; one foraging aboard at 0830 on 27 March'98.

73. Rufous Bush Robin *Circotrichas galactotes*: 1 record 1998.
Single aboard at 1830 on 13 June.

74. European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*: 23 records 1997/98.
Four spring sightings 20 March - 4 April. One handled 20 March '98. 18 autumn sightings 15 Oct - 23 Dec, turning up almost daily during the first six weeks of that period with a peak of five on three separate days. Many landed aboard; partial to feeding on bread scraps put out by crew.

75. Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*: 2 records 1997.
A spring single on 15 May, and an autumn single on 19 October.

76. Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*: 23 records 1997/98.
One spring record (Red-spotted ssp.) on 4 April'98. Autumn records from 14th Oct -7 Nov. On 24th Oct'97 SJH reported 5 on board 'A male on foredeck at 0800, second at 1030 and another at 1330, then none. Female/imm on helideck at 1400 joined by a very dull (imm) male at 1630, both still present and roosting apart on mooring rope at 2000. Several photos taken of female which was very confiding. One male 1000 on 25 Oct'.

77. Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus*: 1 autumn record 1998.
A Female/Immature perched briefly on board on 16 November.

78. Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochrurus*: 4 records 1997/98
A spring male on 18 April, and autumn birds aboard between 24 Sept - 17 Nov.

79. Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*: 14 records 1997/98.
Six spring records of males 4 April and 14 May. Eight autumn records 24 Sept – 14 Oct.

80. Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*: 3 records 1997/98.
Two spring records: a male perched aboard on 26 March, and three (1M and 1 F) passed am 4 April. An autumn single on 24 September.

81. Stonechat *Saxicola rubetra*: 1 record 1997.
Another species one might have expected to see more often, since they winter in pairs in the south around the Arabian Gulf (SH). The only record however was at 1650 on 15 Oct. [**SJH writes**: 'two males with a washed-out plumage, thought to be of the Caspian '*variegata*' race, lot of white at sides of tail. One flew across to platform when disturbed. Other remained aboard and I managed to photograph it. Still present at dusk'].

82. Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: 3 spring records 1997.
On 5 April, and 4 May. Six birds, all seen on board.

83. Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*: 2 autumn records 1997/98.
One reported aboard at 1715 on Oct'97, and another aboard 1150 17 Nov'98.

84. Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellinus*: 4 records 1997/98.
Spring records on 18 March'98 and 18 April'97. A summer bird on 27 July and an autumn record 6 October.

85. Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*: 4 records 1997/98.
A spring male landed at 1150 on 21 March'98. An autumn male flew past at 1100 on 21 November.

86. Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis*: 3 records 1998.
A spring male on board at 1530 on 27 March. An autumn male aboard at 1330 on 20 Nov. Another possible glimpsed briefly flying over at 1115 on 26 November.

87. Dusky Thrush *Turdus naumanii*: (U) 1 record 1997.
Eight birds possibly this species seen on 21 Oct'97

88. Redwing *Turdus iliacus*: 1 winter record 1998.
A single on 1 Dec. pursued by gulls between vessel and platform.

89. Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*: 1 autumn record 1998.
One roosted aboard on 20 November - harried by gulls as it arrived at 1530.

90. Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: 1 spring record 1998.
One briefly aboard at 1600 on 20 March.

91. Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*?: (U) 1 autumn record 1998.
One probable found skulking aboard at 1215 on 1 November.

92. Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella certhiola*? (U): 1 record 1997.
One spring record. A single possible found on board at 1830 on 4 May.

93. Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon:* 1 record 1998.
A confiding autumn individual watched on helideck at 1000 on 16 November.

94. Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*: 1 spring record 1998.
'17 April. 0730 single located onboard, larger than similar *phylloscopi*., very yellow & green, with deep yellow bill, pale wing-panel, prominent yellow eye-ring, legs greyish.'

95. Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*: 2 records 1997.
Surprisingly, only two autumn singles reported – on 29 Sept and 3 Oct. This species is an abundant migrant through Iran.

96. Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*: 1 spring record 1997.
One at 1400 on 22 April – almost certainly an under-recorded species.

97. Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*: 25 records 1997/98.
In spring, four on board around decks on 4 April '98, and at 8 or 10 on 4th May 1997. Autumn records spanned 29 Sep to 25 Oct.

98. Chiffchaff/Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus collybita/trochilus*: 24 records 1997/98.
Four spring records 24 March - 1 May, only one of which was positively ascribed to being green/yellow morph Chiffchaff. Autumn records throughout Oct/Nov many of which were just reported as '*Phylloscopi*'. Three however were specifically mentioned as Willow Warblers.

99. Mountain Chiffchaff *P. c. sindianus*: (U) 9 records 1997.
Spring records of brown/cream morph birds 25 April - 4 May were ascribed by SJH to this race. [**SH comments**: They are more likely to have been either *P. c tristis*, or the locally breeding *P. c lorenzii*, both of which winter around the head of the Gulf, whereas *P. c sindianus* is commonest further east.]

100. Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*: 2 records 1997/98.
A spring bird examined (BEH) and released after a night on board in captivity 5-6 April '97. An autumn single was reported on 1 Nov'97.

101. Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*: 1 record 1997.
One reported 1245 on 20 Oct'97.

102. Spotted Flycatcher *Ficedula striata*: 1 record 1997.
One single at 1820 on 14 May. (**SH Comment**. This is strange for a species that migrates to Africa via the Middle East in large numbers. However a record of an unidentified 'brown' flycatcher on 14 Oct'97 might also have been this species).

103. Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*: 12 records 1997/98.
A SW-NE migrant from the Indian Subcontinent reported 24-30 April, and on return 16 -25 Nov, including two summer-plumaged males, some hawking insects aboard.

104. Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*: 4 records 1997/98.
Autumn singles from 3 Oct - 16 Nov; the last one taken and eaten on board by a Sparrowhawk on 16 Nov'97. (see no. **20** above).

105. Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*: 2 records 1997.
Singles arrived from S, rested aboard 1 hr, on 14 May; another found resting aboard during heavy rain shower 1300 on 15th.

106. Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*: 3 records1997/98.
Two summer records 31 July and 1 Aug'97. One autumn record of a single migrant on board briefly at 1410 on 17 Nov'98.

107. Great Grey / Steppe Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: 3 records 1997/98.
Two aboard briefly on 31 July, and another am 1 Aug'97. ('both birds pale and almost faded looking, upperparts v. pale grey, underparts white, broad white wing-bar, bill heavy, hooked and horn-coloured. Both thought to be of *pallidirostris* race (the local breeding sub-species). Summer record: a single perched on board for 10-mins at 1450 on 6 June'98.

108. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*: 1 autumn record 1998.
A single briefly on board at 1100 on 7 November.

109. Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: 3 records 1997/98.
A single on 20 Oct, and autumn parties on board on 17 Nov (8) and 25 Nov (2). Possibly wanderers between platforms which are in a roughly east - west alignment.

110. Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: 20 records 1997/98.
Winter wanderer/migrants seen Nov - March. Usually in small groups with some landing, but as many as 200 flew past on 11 Nov'98. Gulls harried a few individuals that landed on mast.

111. Crow *Corvus sp.*: 12 records 1997/98.
Described by SJH as Hooded Crows *C. corone*, these were presumably Caucasian Gray Crow *C. f. sharpii*. Winter wanderers/migrants 15 Oct - 30 Dec, landed briefly aboard in ones or twos, or flew past, but once a total of nine seen on 19 Oct'97.

112. Rose-coloured Starling ***Sturnus roseus*****:** 12 records 1997/98.
A spring/summer wanderer, one seen perched on board 21 March'98, but others occurring May - August.

113. Common Starling ***Sturnus vulgaris*****:** 26 records 1997/98.
Spring migrant flocks of up to 26 landed to roost 19-30 March. Autumn migrants more numerous, with records spanning 4 Oct - 27 Nov, peaking with 100+ on 7 Nov'97.

114. House Sparrow ***Passer domesticus:*** 9 records 1997/98.
A spring visitor on 9 Apr'98, with Bramblings (see no.**119** below). Eight autumn records 7 Oct – 29 Dec. Fed on scraps on board.

115. Spanish Sparrow ***Passer hispaniolensis*****:** 5 records 1997/98.
Four spring records totalling eight birds 22-17 May. A summer party of a male, 2 females and a juvenile aboard on 21 June'98.

116. Eurasian Tree Sparrow ***Passer montanus*****:** 5 records 1997/98.
Three spring records 23 March - 3 April. Groups of 3-5 made themselves at home on board, five spending the night roosting in a sheltered spot. Ten aboard 22-23 Oct'97.

117. Rock Sparrow ***Petronia petronia*****:** 1 record 1997.
A single aboard at 1930 on 30 Oct'97, after dark, during heavy rain-shower.

118. Chaffinch ***Fringilla coelebs*****:** 36 records 1997/98.
A prominent bird of passage, especially in the autumn, frequently accompanied by Bramblings. Eight spring records 11 March - 2nd April with a maximum of five in a day, one day. 28 autumn records 5-28 Nov, a max of 12 in a day. Consistently prone to be attracted to feed on bread/scraps put out by the crew.

119. Brambling ***Fringilla montifringilla*****:** 29 records 1997/98.
The "Chaffinch's mate" on migration. Eight spring records 11 March - 9 April'98. Nine autumn records in '97 from 15 Oct - 7 Nov with totals 53 on 10 Oct and 50+ on 21 Oct. Mostly small groups arrive from N, some aboard briefly then dep. S (Winds N'ly F2-3). In 1998, 12 autumn records 6-27 Nov'98 (and later ones on 4 and 30 Dec'98), either flying over, calling, or landed aboard.

120. European Siskin ***Carduela spinus*****:** 5 records 1998.
A spring record on 21 March, 4 autumn records 6-27 Nov, either flying over (calling) or landed aboard. A max of 23 in one day, on 22 November.

121. Common Rosefinch ***Carpodacus erythrinus*****:** 2 records 1997.
A single timid male on board at 1900 on 4 May. At 0705 on 21 Oct SJH attracted by "chipping" call. Superb male perched on wire – not seen after 0800.

122. Hawfinch ***Coccothraustes coccothraustes*****:** 5 autumn records 1998.
From 8-25 November.All aboard, mostly foraging on deck.

123. Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*: 9 records 1997/98.
Spring records 25 March to 4 April. Mostly reported aboard. Autumn records 19 Oct - 7 Nov, with max 19 on 20 Oct'97.

124. Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalus*: 1 record 1997.
A superbly coloured pair aboard on 20 October.

125. Cinerous Bunting *Emberiza cineracea* (U): 7 records 1997/98.
Probables seen on 17 July'97 and 10 Aug'97. Among other unidentified buntings reported in May/June/Jul/Oct, a male, female and juvenile on board on 23 July was thought by SJH to be of Iranian race of this species *E. c. semenowi*.

126. Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* (U): 1 record 1997.
The only identified bird was seen on 5 May'97. (**SH comments**: 'being a common migrant through the Middle East, this begs the question as to whether some of the many unidentified Buntings reported by SJH may have been this species').

127. Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica*: 1 record 1997.
Twelve aboard at close quarters on 20 Oct. SJH writes: 'Smaller than yellowhammers, male black headed with white supercilium, whitish spots on nape, rusty red nape merging at sides of neck with rusty breast band, large rusty streaks on flanks and rusty rump. Females and immatures much paler and duller. Arrived in a noisy group constantly calling to each other with 'zeep' sounding calls'.

128. Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*: 2 records 1997/98.
A pair aboard 5-7 May'97 - the male was photographed (see *Sea Swallow* 48: 30). A breeding-plumaged male was aboard 1400-1630 on 23 March'98.

Other Taxa reported:

Hummingbird Hawk-moth *Macroglossum stellatarum*.	22 April '97
Painted Lady Butterfly *Vanessa cardui*.	6 April and 1 May'97
Caspian Seal *Phoca caspica*.	8-9 April, 16-26 June
Bat sp.	8-10 Nov'98
	4-22 Nov'98

Acknowlegements

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AN ANNOTATED SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SRI LANKA'S SEABIRDS

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For almost three decades the Seabird Watch (Sri Lanka) has conducted meaningful studies on the country's seabirds. As these are documented in a variety of publications it is not easy to locate relevant information. This list of selected references is therefore compiled to assist workers to access information on Sri Lankan seabirds.

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Juvenile Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons* and *Sterna albifrons sinensis* behind) Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005. *Photo:* POA (Metoc) C Patrick

Sea Swallow 54 (2005)

FROM DENMARK STRAITS TO THE BIGHT OF BENIN

W A J Cunningham

HMS *Snowdrop*. The heroine of the piece. The author helped to commission her in Smiths Dock, Middlesborough, in January 1941 after receiving his own commission in HMS *King Alfred* three months before.

I really had no idea why we were sent from Tobermory to Iceland in late January 1942, nerves still twitching from our frenzied work-up under the eagle eye of Vice-Admiral Sir Gilbert Stephenson KBE CB CMG. The more adaptable of us enjoyed *'Smiling Through'* with Jeanette Macdonald on HMS *Hecla* on arrival in Hvalfjordur and spending kronur in Reykjavik the next day. Our unexpected destination, Akureyn on the north coast, was looked upon with nervous foreboding, allayed for me at any rate by the sight of my first Iceland Gull *Larus leucopterus*, in the Denmark Straits. On arrival, I, as Navigating Officer, accompanied the Captain to the Naval Base for orders. The Staff Officer Operations told us we were to patrol the Straits between the edge of the ice sheet and the coast and report any vessels seen. At this time the pocket battleships, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, were lurking in Brest and it may have been them we were to look for if they tried to break out into the Atlantic through the Straits. The Captain, perhaps with the Bismark scenario of the previous year at the back of his mind, asked what we were expected to do if we sighted them, to receive the flippant reply the query no doubt deserved, 'Don't ask silly questions'. Although the odds, both in numbers and weight, were not in our favour; like the Light Brigade, '(Our's) was not to reason why,

(Our's) but to do and die.' HMS *Snowdrop* was a little flower class corvette, armed with a 4" gun and machine guns. The sting in her tail comprised a full complement of depth charges and the Depth Charge Officer was told that it was up to him if the worst came to the worst. He claimed however that his crew had been trained to deal with submarines and they had had no practice with capital ships. The Battle of the Atlantic was at its height and perhaps the Admiralty were more than usually badly off for expendable ships but we almost wished we were back with our group. And it was not long before we were back in Scotland again.

After three days leave in the Clyde we were supplied with tropical kit and set sail for Gibraltar. On March 3, to my relief, Ponta Delgada in the Azores appeared where I said it would. En route, a Curlew *Numenius arquatus* flew past us, co. 090 (magnetic) (we didn't have a gyro compass either!), about 200 miles from the nearest land! I knew that because I had fixed our position that morning by star sights and the laborious Marc St Hilaire method, taught me from basics, 'hands on', by our excellent, old RNR Commanding Officer.

Our onward voyage was enlivened for me by first sightings of dolphins, turtles, Portuguese Men o' War *Physalia physalla*, flying fish and storm-petrels. About the middle of March we arrived at our final destination, Freetown in Sierra Leone.

The Naval Base in Freetown at that time was in HMS *Phioctetes*, an ancient merchant ship moored in midstream. I had served 15 months at sea in a corvette, and for 14 months of that period had been in charge of a watch as a sub-lieutenant, the service required for the award of a Watch-keeping Certificate. Bearing the endorsement of my Commanding Officer I repaired on board the Phioctetesto obtain the N.O.I.C's approval I have it in front of me as I write: it is a prized possession for it was signed by a very brave man, R. Sherbrooke, Captain (D) 18th Destroyer Flotilla. I was to meet him again in Alexandria in March 1946, when as Officer of the Day I boarded his vessel on arrival. I cannot remember what passed between us but I hope I, as a veteran of Russian convoys like him, had the courage to congratulate him on his VC and remind him of our previous encounter.

Forbidden to keep a diary of our movements by K.R.& A.I., I was careful to confine my exiguous comments on natural phenomena to the small diurnal space afforded by my pocket diary. It was doubtful if entries, for example, on March 7 of a probable Leach's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*, one of the Frigate Birds *Fregata sp.* on the 10th or of Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis* and a skua *Stercorarius sp.* on the 11th were of much use to the enemy. A day or two later I watched an exciting chase by two skuas of flying fish *Exoctetus* sp. which 'rose more than 20ft above the water and zig-zagged like a bird before seeking refuge in a 90 degree turn in sea.' This enforced brevity of many entries I now find infuriating; like that of March 16 which was probably made in Freetown 'Saw eagle like bird with broad, feathery white wings and golden brown in centre and front.' Was it a bad description of a Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis?*

On arrival in Freetown I had bought Some Common Birds of West Africa, published in 1933 by the Church Missionary Society Bookshop in Lagos, Nigeria. It had been written by W.A. Fairbairn BSc, FRGS, MBOU, of the Forestry Department, Nigeria. The painted illustrations were, apparently, by the author and were not really very helpful, but that was the kind of

thing one had to put up with in those days. Nor was the heavy old 1900A 7x50 binocular, the badge of the OOW, of much help either. Many of the vernacular names have since been changed and my vulture was then called a Vulturine Fish Eagle. On a fly leaf there is a note I made at the time that the local sub-species of the Black Kite *Milvus mirans parasitus* was common in Freetown.

On April 10, just north of the Equator, we passed close alongside 'a curious, blunt-headed, black, whale-like fish'. From the huge size and spotted back, I later came to the conclusion that I had seen my first and only Whale Shark *Rhincodon typus* the biggest fish in the world. In those waters navigation was a dawdle with perfect horizons, clear skies and on occasion Venus and sun conspicuously available for a morning fix! I suppose the two extremes of watch-keeping conditions in a minor war vessel at that time could be found in the middle watch in January in the Barents Sea and in the morning watch in July in the equatorial Atlantic. There the sun rose at a reasonable time, halfway through the watch, when the duty hands were called to wash down the upper deck. One could paddle around in bare feet in warm sea water, picking up enough stranded flying fish for the Wardroom's breakfast and, if one was lucky, rejoice in a tropical shower.

We seem to have been mainly on our own then, escorting small convoys along the coast, shedding or picking up ships one by one at interesting places like Monrovia, Accra and Takoradi. A Red-billed Tropic-bird *Phaethon aethereus* was the only notable bird seen, not far from Lagos. A photograph reminds me that we had a boiler clean in a floating dry dock in Lagos on May 22 before taking one of the 'C' Class cruisers under our wing, as A/S escort, to Cape Town for repair. An entry for June 1 puzzles me now. It concerns a 'Dark grey seabird that took shelter on fo'c'sle and allowed itself to be handled. Little bigger than Common Tern *Sterna hirunda*. Brown tail coverts. Webbed feet. Black thin bill. Small black eyes.'

Off Pointe Noire, in latitude 5 degrees South, more than a dozen of us went sick with fever and, carrying only an SBA, we abandoned our charge and entered port for orders. These were to return to Lagos where I and the other patients were landed to the European Hospital. I, the only Scot, was lucky in that the doctor, matron and some of the nursing staff were Scottish and I received VIP treatment. My convalescence was aided by the loan of a wind up gramophone and a bundle of Scottish Dance Music records. I had a beautiful room, open to the forest, but recall that I had serious thoughts of a return of delirium when I woke up one morning to see green lizards running up the walls.

The only ornithological memories are of an African Pied Wagtail *Motacilla aguinip vidua* at the hospital and of two Grey-headed Kingfishers *Halcyon l. leucocephala* perched together on mooring wires at Apapa.

For some reason, not recorded, during July and August, we ranged quite far into the South Atlantic and called at St Helena where I bought picture postcards. The only birds worth recording seem to have been Frigate-birds and White-tailed Tropic-birds *Phaethon lepturus* that I noted were not uncommon south of the Equator.

On September 9 I was somewhat indiscreet in recording the sighting of a Kiskadee. That I failed to note whether it was a Great or Lesser would have been due to sheer ignorance and not a ruse to confuse the enemy. I can now safely avouch that it was most likely a Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus trinitatis* which is found only in Trinidad whither we had gone for fuel and stores. When I went ashore in Port of Spain to replenish our stock of depth charges the civilian Ordnance Officer who came to my aid proved to be a fellow Glaswegian. He had gone through school with me to fetch up as dux in his final year, to whom I had been *proxima accessit*. Some years previously I had grudged him success in a higher grade in the Civil Service than I attained. But now, there he was stuck in an office in a torrid, tropical island while I, a more or less licensed pirate, roamed the tropic seas in comparative comfort.

Diego Garcia 2005 - Additional views

These shots show the habitat and landscape of the island.

Seabird colony, Middle Island, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

Horsburgh Point Inlet, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

West Island, Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean, May 2005.
Photo: POA (Metoc) C Patrick.

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Interested persons are invited to submit contributions for *Sea Swallow*; authors do not need to be RNBWS members. Material may take the form of papers, notes, progress reports, letters or reviews.
The style used in *Sea Swallow*, should be followed, with the standard abbreviations, nomenclature and use of references.
Manuscripts should ideally be typed in double spacing, together with figures and diagrams. Accompanying photographs are preferred as prints rather than slides. Those with facilities to do so are encouraged to send on IBM PC compatible 3.5" disc (specifying the word processing software used) or CD Rom, together with a hard copy print. ASCII back-tip text is also desirable.
Contributions are welcome at any time, but if for inclusion in the next edition must reach the Editor by 31 May.